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# Towards a sustainable peace and reconciliation in Côte d'Ivoire

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## Introduction

This article explores the possibility of genuine reconciliation, healing and forgiveness in Côte d'Ivoire. Formerly one of the most stable countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Côte d'Ivoire was plunged into protracted civil war between its northern part and southern section in 2002. The aftermath of the armed conflict and plans to organise fresh presidential and parliamentary elections remain fragile partly as a result of the concentration of the conflict resolution processes at the top political level. This article considers the need for a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) in post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire similar to that established by South Africa after the collapse of apartheid to deal with past violations of human rights and to help recreate trust in South African society<sup>1</sup> and that established in Sierra Leone, which was based on the

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Lomé Peace Agreement and jointly signed by the Sierra Leone government and rebel parties in July 1999 to deal with war injustices and heal the rift in society caused by the atrocities committed during the war.<sup>2</sup> The Sierra Leone TRC also contributed to a national vision as a unifying goal for the country's future. The words of the former president of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano, at the 2007 Albert Luthuli Memorial Lecture in Durban, prove instructive in this regard: '[C]onflict resolution goes beyond prevention and management. It goes into establishing the root causes of the conflict or the underlying incompatibility of a conflict, including attempts to get the parties to mutually accept each other's existence.'<sup>3</sup> The article takes cognisance of this imperative and proposes truth and reconciliation processes as a means of building sustainable peace in Côte d'Ivoire.

## Actors in and background of the Côte d'Ivoire conflict

The key actors in the Ivorian conflict are the government and two rebel parties. The Ivorian government is regarded as strongly southern-ethnocentric, representative of the Baoule and Bete ethnic groups, and with a strong emphasis on what is popularly known as 'Ivorite' or 'pure Ivorian-ness'.<sup>4</sup> At the outbreak of the conflict Laurent Gbagbo was the country's president and he was elected in a controversial election in 1998. Gbagbo's party is the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), which used its parliamentary majority to put in place an electorate centred on the controversy of full 'Ivoirite' citizenship. (This aspect will be explained below.)

The rebels comprise two militia forces. One of these is the *Mouvement Populaire du Grand Quest* (MPIGO, or Popular Ivorian Movement for the Great West) which is based at the western border of Côte d'Ivoire. This group also contains insurgents from neighbouring Liberia and former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) Sierra Leonean soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The second rebel group is the *Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix* (MJP, or Movement for Justice and Peace) which occupies the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire. Members of this group identify themselves as former soldiers and 'young Ivorians' (former student leaders) whose aim is to liberate the North from discrimination. They are mainly northern Ivorian citizens. Guillane Soro, a radical former student leader, is a key figure in the MJP. The political issue at the heart of the conflict is a constitutional one. In terms of the Constitution the president should be a 'pure' Ivorian, in that the parentage of the presidential candidate should be full-blood Ivorian without a mix from other countries, such as from its Burkina Faso or Mali neighbours. This part of the Constitution was challenged in 1993 by Ouattara, a presidential candidate from the North. Ouattara claimed that this constitutional requirement was not an original provision but an insertion orchestrated to bar him from contesting the presidential elections and to favour Henri Bédié, a presidential candidate from the South. By

extension, the provision was meant to prevent other potential northern candidates from acceding to the presidency in Côte d'Ivoire within the context of 'Ivorité' ideology and difference.<sup>6</sup>

The ethnic-economic connection is central to understanding the Ivorian civil war. Northern Côte d'Ivoire is underdeveloped and its people live in abject poverty and have limited income-earning opportunities and access to social services. Sandrine Mesplé-Somps<sup>7</sup> argues that the northern Ivorians suffer from stark income inequality. The consequence imposed by being born to a northern farmer father, the most common occupation, is an income well below that of southerners (see table 1).

**Table 1 Mean per capita income, in US\$**

Father's position	1985–1988	1998
Farmer	100	n/a
Non-farmer – low education level	204*	n/a
Non-farmer – high education level	313*	n/a
Place of birth:		
North	100	100
Abidjan	203*	173*
Elsewhere	110*	124*

\* At 1% significance

Source Sandrine Mesplé-Somps, Optimal fiscal policies according to equality of opportunity: a case study applied to Ivory Coast, Paris: IRD, DIAL, <http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/conferences/2008-EDiA/papers/315-Mespl%C3%A9-Somps.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2008)

According to Mesplé-Somps:

Non-egalitarian public policies have been implemented since the colonial period to nowadays: farmers are used to finance [a] public budget that [is] almost [all] spent to finance urban facilities (much more in Abidjan than in other towns). Dualism against agriculture has been coupled with an unequal access to education. [Both these] elements induce low intergenerational mobility that reinforces inequality of opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

This aspect of structurally induced inequality of opportunities has continually drawn the ire of the educated Ivorian northerners, mostly from the army and academic institutions, as this quote from Soro illustrates:

If you are from the North, you are subhuman, according to the government. We want a united Côte d'Ivoire. We want a country that lives in harmony and includes everyone.<sup>9</sup>

It is instructive to note the religious demography of Côte d'Ivoire in the analysis of the North–South schism in the country. The affluent and developed southern sector is dominated by Baoulé and Bété people, of whom Christians make up 25 per cent, Muslims 40 per cent and traditional religion adherents about 35 per cent. The Muslims are generally groups who have migrated to Côte d'Ivoire from various parts of West Africa, especially Burkina Faso and Mali. The strong ethnic differences and stereotyping normally manifest along these religious lines but obviously none of the groups dominates based on numbers.<sup>10</sup>

These social differences have been politicised along ethnic and nationality lines, in line with the concepts of conflict theory. Social differences can indeed lead to economic marginalisation and ethno-religious discrimination, and thus constitute a basis for structural violence.<sup>11</sup> The Ivorian conflict is fundamentally the result of politicised ethno-economic and religious differences.

## **Experience of the truth and reconciliation processes**

Since December 2008 the government and the Northern parties have pledged to pursue peace to its conclusive end. Currently, the conflict appears to be unstable as preparations for the upcoming elections in December 2009 are taking place – a decade after the inception of the Ivorian intra-state armed conflict.<sup>12</sup> The ‘momentum’ generated since the end of 2008 towards a democratic election is reported to be waning.<sup>13</sup> The UN has called for a concerted effort by the two parties not to derail the possibility of the December 2009 election after repeated postponements. The main concern as reported in April 2009 to the UN Security Council by the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) depends on sustaining the process of ‘reunification’.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the ceasefire, the peace process has not been completely successful and this state of affairs is likely to continue until the comprehensive demobilisation and reintegration of combatants of some of the rebel groups has taken place. Agreements have been reached regarding the compilation of a new voters’ register and the issuing of national identity cards for the December 2009 elections, and reports indicate that so far, 6 081 625 people out of a total of 8 600 000 voters have registered.<sup>15</sup> Refugee returnees are currently being settled as the situation is gradually improving in some parts of the country.<sup>16</sup>

The post-conflict management period requires Côte d'Ivoire to put into place mechanisms aimed at peacebuilding, such as democratic institutions and national reconstruction programmes, to ensure a sustainable peace. According to Andrew Rigby reconciliation ‘is not an occurrence’<sup>17</sup> and can be achieved only within an appropriate

reconciliatory framework which seeks to transform hostilities into positive coexistence. Historically, some TRCs have contributed to such a framework. For example, TRCs in South American countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and El Salvador have helped to partially clarify uncertainties regarding military regimes' atrocities, disappearances and killings.<sup>18</sup> However, these TRCs took place during the transition from military to civilian democratic regimes and may not work in the Ivorian situation.

The influence of the outgoing military governments had weakened the effectiveness of South American TRCs. South Africa's TRC does, however, provide an example of a truth commission which worked without state interference. In South Africa, the truth led the way towards an understanding by victims of who did what and why.<sup>19</sup> Such a truth is like a declaration without compulsion. 'Acknowledgement' should provide salient and satisfactory answers to questions of what transpired, why it transpired, and who was responsible.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which was enacted in 1995, set four tasks for the South African TRC:<sup>21</sup>

- To determine the causes, nature and extent of the gross violation of human rights
- To facilitate the granting of amnesty to those who applied for it (based on prescribed conditions)
- To enable victims/survivors of violations to provide their own account of their experiences
- To compile a comprehensive report including recommendations to prevent future violation of human rights

The Sierra Leone TRC was formed because 'Sierra Leoneans had a need to express and acknowledge suffering, a need to relate their stories and experiences, a need to know who was behind the atrocities, a need to explain and contextualize decisions and conduct, a need to reconcile with former enemies, a need to begin personal and national healing and a need to build accountability in order to address impunity'.<sup>22</sup> The Act which created the Sierra Leone TRC made provision for three tasks, namely statement taking, hearing and reporting. The framework made provision for two auxiliary units, namely an investigation/research unit and a legal/recommendation advisory unit. In these examples the input of information into the TRCs was based on public opinion and public contributions, and public confidence in the TRCs supported the investigative processes and outcomes.

The relevance of truth is that it makes it possible to clarify the underlying issues that have precipitated and/or sustained the conflict. It can also prevent inaccurate historical recording. Politicians alone cannot make this happen. John Lederach posits that the entire range of social structures should participate in the cooling-down period to make way for reconciliation.<sup>23</sup>

This lends legitimacy of the process and forms a basis for trust. Furthermore, dealing with root causes helps create an atmosphere conducive to the achievement of the first and most difficult phase, namely to establish legitimacy. Experts suggest that the level of enmity and demonising of opponents should be reduced through the use of middle-level figures and grassroots leaders who are able to communicate the process to the communities they represent. The broad inclusiveness does not only facilitate better communication but also emphasises the legitimacy of the process. The overarching aim is to establish enduring security and peace. However, this has not been the case in Côte d'Ivoire.

The failure of the government to carry on with the mandated peace requirements that should have led to a democratic election in October 2006 was perceived as a miscarriage of justice by northern Ivorians and the international community. So too, was the government's failure to cooperate with and support the efforts of interim Prime Minister Banny. The government knew that the Northerners' demand for recognition meant that they should be eligible to vote. However, the government did not conduct a voters' registration process, using the failed disarmament of the rebels as a pretext for their failure to do so. The government therefore did not guarantee justice and security for the opposition. This drew international criticism, because it did not augur well for the peaceful democratic process necessary for building trust and enduring peace. In addition, ethnic nationalism and xenophobia undermined the efforts of ECOWAS to promote reintegration.<sup>24</sup> Given this state of affairs, certain initiatives are required to ensure strong peacebuilding efforts so as to guarantee sustainable peace.

There is a need to heal social rifts and address injustices and human rights violations. Issues that are a barrier to trust, security and justice must be removed. Reframing the conflict to facilitate a peace that unites the nation begins with measures that foster forgiveness and stimulate the healing and peacebuilding process. In the words of Alpha Blonde, a musician and UN ambassador for peace in Côte d'Ivoire:

Forbidding the concept of Ivoirité is the first part of Côte d'Ivoire's healing ... Not only saying [Ivoirité] is forbidden; it's abolished, it's illegal, but on the ground, we have to see that too. To see that the police will not – just because of your name, because of the way you dress – see if you deserve to be humiliated or not, and look at you like a second-class citizen.

Such measures can pave the way for peaceful elections and enduring democracy.<sup>25</sup>

In most post-conflict situations, it is the TRC that meets the needs of parties. In South Africa and Latin American countries the introduction of such a mechanism following politically motivated human rights violations resulted in a lasting reconciliation process. The root cause of the Ivorian conflict lies in political, ethnic and religious human rights violations. At the heart of the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is that identity labels were politically

engineered to serve the myopic and narrow interest of particular elites. Therefore, reaching a viable agreement based on a mutual desire for reconciliation should be followed by a truth commission, fashioned after the South African or Sierra Leonean model. This should take the form of verifying human rights violations, reconciling affected victims of the conflict and the offenders, and paving the way for social and national reconstruction. The essence of reconciliation is to build a new future of security and unity in diversity.

## **Reconciliation in Côte d'Ivoire**

Forgiveness is being addressed last because it is such a gradual development and is contingent on the level of trust which is brought about through acknowledgement, confession and apology and, in some cases (as happened in Mozambique), a religious dimension which requires repentance. It is a personal acknowledgement, embedded in the deepest will, that requires time for reflection and self-will before it can be achieved, especially in cases of violent loss and damage. The relevance of forgiveness in the Ivorian context is that it should promote better healing of individuals and groups who were targets of undue violence and destruction of life and property. This requires a truth commission that offers the affected individuals and groups the opportunity to vent their anger and hurt.<sup>26</sup>

The selection and composition of an Ivorian TRC should take cognisance of the inadequacies of the South American TRCs to avoid a politicised agenda controlled by the head of state and threatened by the military. The two African examples offer substantive positive lessons in the selection and provision of a legal framework for enactment of a TRC in the African context. The selection of members of an Ivorian TRC should take place after a successful presidential and parliamentary election. The TRC should comprise eminent personalities which proportionally represent various sectors of the country. The nominees should command respect and be seen to be impartial and honest. The commission should reflect the desire for national unity and represent both major and minority ethnic groups, various religious and political factions, and NGOs. Whilst it is expedient to avoid prescribing a precise formula which could stifle local creativity and ownership, the following subsections contain suggestions, recommendations and a planning framework based on the needs that result from the conflict and underlying factors that contributed to it.

The extent of violence in Côte d'Ivoire does not approach that of Sierra Leone and Liberia. However, there have been significant human rights abuses, committed by both government and rebels, which require some retributive justice. But the essential focus should be on reconciliation, which means that restorative justice should be the paramount consideration. The TRC should be 'a process whereby all the parties with stake in a particular offence and its implications for the future' receive proper and fair redress, after acknowledgement and pardoning processes.<sup>27</sup>

## **Disarmament**

The increase in crime in the country as a result of small arms proliferation requires urgent action internally and regionally. It requires the enforcement of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, and the prohibition or curtailment of local manufacture is germane to stability and sustainable reconciliation in all post-conflict states.

## **A legitimate election**

Côte d'Ivoire is yet to emerge out of its conflict cycle and its ability to do so and to maintain peace will be defined by the nature and outcome of the election processes. The election is unfortunately encountering delays due to so-called 'technical' hitches regarding voters' registration, citizenship and identity authentication.<sup>28</sup> In their flight from conflict, many Ivorian refugees – especially those from the North lost their identity documents.<sup>29</sup>

## **A widely accepted account of 'truth'**

The Ivorian conflict has been sustained by subjective truths, entrenched myopic group perceptions, incorrect assumptions as well as political and ideological intolerance. In Gandhi's view, such subjective truth results in discrimination (based on subjective judgement by one's own standards) and violence occur because one party did not understand another group's behaviour and the implied meaning thereof.<sup>30</sup>

Subjective truth is a lie. Therefore one party's perceptions, if misconstrued by another culturally divergent group, result in a breakdown of rapport and ultimately in conflict.<sup>31</sup> This often leads to disregard of the first party's humanity and their entitlement to fairness. It is a widely accepted truth that a TRC can facilitate reaching the real, objective 'truth', which should in turn lead to denouncement of the subjective view of other people, the essence of regret for harm caused as a result of subjective views, and readiness to provide redress and pursue coexistence based upon forgiveness. In this case there is a need for the recognition of every Ivorian to the right to live and right to freedom of practice of group culture, religion and other group identity aspects without these factors becoming instruments of discrimination and dehumanisation.

## **Acknowledgement and reparation**

Sustaining reconciliation requires not only that key national leaders append their signatures to a peacemaking agreement, but also public declaration and public acknowledgement of excesses of violence committed during a conflict situation. Criminal events such as violation of women and killings should be denounced. There is evidence that a lack of such public denunciation stifles the reconciliation process as it hinders the willingness of individuals and collective bodies to forgive. Therefore a legitimate democratic election

and the winning party should publicly acknowledge this and proceed with the needed reparation, which should also be stipulated by a truth, reconciliation and reconstruction commission (TRRC).

### **‘Binding forces’**

Binding forces are needed to resolve the Côte d’Ivoire case. One example of such a binding force is the UN appointment of the popular musician from the North as its ambassador for peace. His performance pulls people from previously opposing sides together and he is able to communicate peace through his songs. The post-conflict period will require programmes and activities that serve to integrate various ethnic groups. Providing condensed TRRC reports in various languages, as was done in Sierra Leone, will also serve to heal and reconcile the population. Other post-conflict objectives, such as setting and then working towards achieving national goals and an agenda for poverty eradication, would serve to provide a broader outlook on the national agenda which will move the country beyond narrow, segregated and regional perspectives.

### **Addressing structural inequalities and material needs**

The level of disparity among ethnic groups which underlie the conflict and the political chasm left in the wake of the conflict requires post-conflict projects that serve to unite former adversaries and provide recognition of each group’s needs. Provision of education, health facilities and basic amenities, among others, should receive priority. It is in the context and spirit of reconciliation that parties demonstrate their understanding and acceptance of each other’s issues or biases. Accordingly it is crucial that the government budget focus should shift to issues affecting human security, rather than state security. In Côte d’Ivoire this requires a political will that can take practical steps to correct underdevelopment in the North. For example, future attempts at increasing armament or military expenditure at the cost of critical development concerns will discourage trust and breach the relevance of reconciliation for peace and social development. Furthermore, experience has shown that excessive military expenditure does not deter rebel activity, instead this is more likely to be achieved by the state fulfilling its role in social services delivery and fair economic distribution.

### **An on-going effort**

To reconcile and unite people that not so long ago were calling each other enemies, requires time and a concerted effort. This fact was reiterated by the Special Court of Sierra Leone, too:

The reconciliation process is not finished when people peacefully co-exist. Reconciliation needs to go further: people need to understand that the only

future they have is a common one and that the only way forward towards development is by working together. Working together requires more than tolerance and respect. It requires consultation, debate and agreement, an understanding of the fact that common interests can be in conflict with personal interests and that co-operation requires compromise.<sup>32</sup>

At this time Ivorian citizens and the international community need to be patient to allow genuine reconciliation to take root and permeate Ivorian society.

## Conclusion

There is a possibility of maintaining sustainable peace in Côte d'Ivoire. The profile of the conflict reflects a crisis on three levels, namely in the personalisation, identity and cross-border phases, in all of which acceptance and reconciliation is the key to transforming the stalemate or crisis-levelling stage. That can be pursued by means of a conflict transformation and process-oriented approach, underscored by the realisation that it takes time to work on the root and underlying factors.<sup>33</sup> The approach considers the various parties and seeks to bring in not only the top level actors but make sure the negotiation parties include members from all social levels. The traditional state-level mediation is structural and ignores the relational dimension of the conflict. This relational dimension has been shown to be concerned with the reconciliation of the nation at large, not only the elitist faction, and with healing of the most afflicted through the opportunity to forgive and to promote healing.

So, to facilitate transformation of the conflict into peaceful coexistence, I propose that a post-conflict and post-election truth, reconciliation and reconstruction commission, whose task shall be establishing mechanisms for sustaining the post-conflict peace process, be set up. A tribunal type arbitration similar to the Sierra Leone special court can be set to deal with conflict issues and acute human rights abuses.

## Notes

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