

Sierra Leone: Does Reconciliation Heal the Wounds of War?



Post-conflict reconciliation led to greater forgiveness of war perpetrators and strengthened social capital, but at the cost of reduced psychological health.

Most wars today are civil wars, which divide countries along economic, ethnic or political lines. In many cases, these cleavages happen within communities, pitting one neighbor against another. The prevalence of civil wars has therefore spurred efforts to re-build social cohesion and promote social capital as a part of post-conflict recovery.

Truth and reconciliation processes are a common approach used across the world to promote this type of societal healing. These processes bring war victims face-to-face with perpetrators in forums where victims describe war atrocities, and perpetrators confess to war crimes without facing punishment. Proponents of reconciliation processes claim that they are highly effective – not only in rebuilding social ties among individuals and promoting societal healing, but also in providing psychological relief and aiding individual healing. Yet, there is little rigorous evidence of whether, and how, reconciliation processes help communities heal from conflict.

To shed light on this topic, researchers from New York University, Georgetown University and the World Bank partnered with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) to evaluate the impact of a community-level reconciliation program in Sierra Leone.

The program, which was designed and implemented by a Sierra Leonean NGO, had several features in common with truth and reconciliation processes from around the world, bringing victims face to face with perpetrators in community forums. Victims detailed war atrocities; perpetrators admitted to crimes and sought forgiveness for their actions; and no one was compensated financially or punished for participating. The forums in the study took place 2011-2012, a decade after the civil war ended.

The independent, randomized evaluation revealed that reconciliation had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it promoted societal healing: it led to greater forgiveness of perpetrators and strengthened various measures of social capital. On the other hand, these gains came at the cost of reduced psychological health: the program worsened depression, anxiety and trauma.

The results suggest that talking about war atrocities can prove psychologically traumatic by invoking war memories and re-opening old war wounds. The researchers conclude that reconciliation programs should to be re-designed in ways that minimize their psychological costs, while retaining their societal benefit.

Context

Sierra Leone experienced a devastating civil war from 1991 to 2002. More than 50,000 people were killed, thousands more were amputated, and over half the population was displaced. Much of the violence took place within communities, with members from the same villages taking up arms against each other.

Following the conflict, the Sierra Leonean government and international community set up a national Truth and

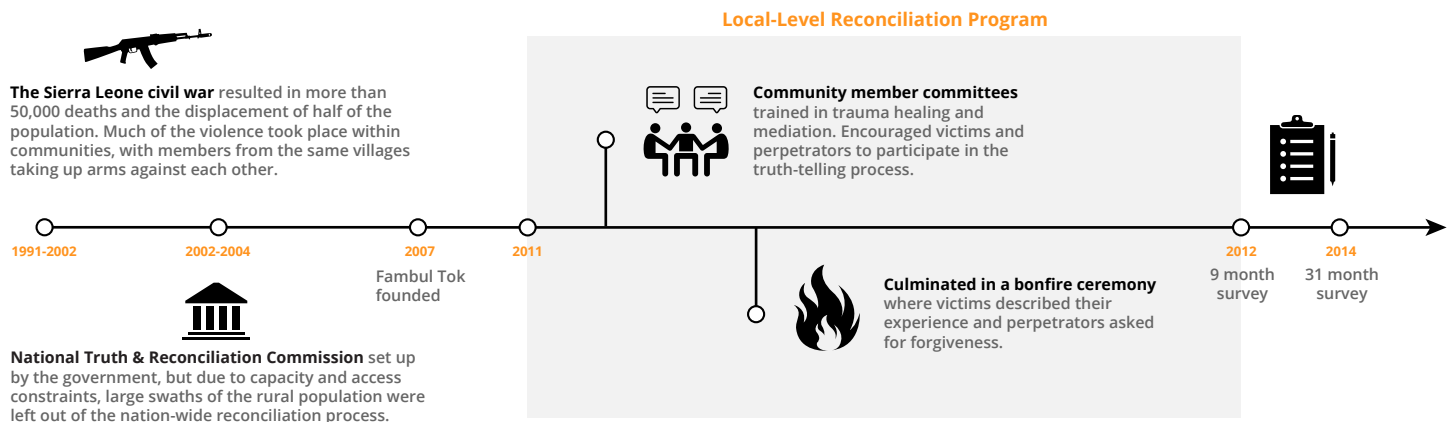
Reconciliation Commission, but the commission only had the capacity to cover a small fraction of the atrocities that happened during the war. Very few rural Sierra Leoneans were able to participate, so large swaths of the population were left out of the reconciliation process. Fambul Tok (“Family Talk” in Krio) was founded in 2007 to address this gap and facilitate local-level reconciliation in rural communities. It currently operates in five of 13 districts in Sierra Leone.

Local-level Reconciliation

Starting in 2007, Fambul Tok began organizing reconciliation processes in sections of 10 villages. As a part of their program, Fambul Tok first consulted all village chiefs to get their consent and support for the project. The NGO then coordinated several months of community organization. Committees composed of community members were trained in trauma healing and mediation, and conducted outreach to encourage victims and perpetrators to participate in the truth-telling process. These activities culminated in a two-day long bonfire ceremony where

victims described their experiences and perpetrators asked for forgiveness. These truth telling ceremonies incorporated traditional and religious rituals to promote community healing.

To continue community healing after the ceremony, Fambul Tok set up a symbolic Peace Tree in each village and, in some areas, communal farms. In addition, it helped establish a Peace Mothers’ group to promote women’s economic activities and discuss gender-targeted atrocities perpetrated during the war.



Evaluation

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation of the reconciliation program in the context of Fambul Tok’s expansion in 2011. Before the expansion occurred, researchers assigned some sections to participate in the program and assigned other sections to serve as a comparison group.

The evaluation occurred in three waves to allow Fambul Tok to work within its capacity. Within each wave, the research team first surveyed communities at baseline. Researchers then matched sections into pairs, stratified by district, using baseline data on exposure to violence, conflict incidence, economic activity and psychological health. They then randomly assigned sections in each pair to either participate in the program or to be a part of the comparison group.

The first wave included 40 sections, which were surveyed both nine months and 31 months after the ceremony, allowing for measurement of long-run effects. The second wave included 60 sections, which were surveyed 19 months after the program ended. An additional 60 sections comprised a third wave, but

data collection for this wave was interrupted by the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone.

The research team surveyed 10-12 individuals from two villages in each section, including over 2,200 individuals from 200 villages in the study. The surveys measured forgiveness using an index of 12 questions on a 4-point Likert scale, which are designed to gauge feelings such as anger and desire for revenge toward former war perpetrators. They also measured social capital outcomes including trust, participation in community groups, contributions to public goods, and social networks, as reflected in relationships like friendships.

Though it was challenging to track interviewees in the context of rural Sierra Leone, the research team successfully followed up with a large fraction of the study participants interviewed at baseline: 93 percent were re-interviewed in at least one endline survey in the two waves of the study, while 87 percent were re-interviewed in both the 9-month and 31-month endline surveys in wave one of the study.

Results

- » **Individuals living in program villages forgave those who had perpetrated crimes against them.** The reconciliation program boosted an index of forgiveness by 30 percent more in program villages relative to comparison villages. However, there were no significant shifts in attitudes over the guilt of former combatants or perceptions that they would participate in future violence.
- » **Individuals living in program villages showed more trust of marginalized groups.** Trust of former combatants increased by 22.2 percent while trust of migrants (many of whom are perceived to be former combatants) increased by 6.7 percent. However, trust toward community members more generally did not increase.
- » **Social capital increased in program villages.** Social network strength increased by 11 percent, as individuals formed more friendships and relied more on one another for advice and help. Those residing in program villages also became more community-oriented in their behavior. They participated more in community groups, such as PTAs, women’s groups and religious associations, and contributed more to public goods such as the construction of schools and health clinics.
- » **However, psychological health also worsened for individuals in program villages.** People in these villages scored higher on measures of depression, anxiety and PTSD. For example, the

prevalence of clinical PTSD, or severe trauma, was 36 percent higher in program villages than in comparison villages, where prevalence of PTSD was 8 percent.

These psychological effects were not limited to or larger among those victimized during the war. This suggests that confronting war memories through reconciliation proved traumatic for a wide swath of community members as perpetrators admitted to crimes publicly, and others learned about new atrocities committed during the war.

- » **Positive and negative effects persisted over the long run.** The results from wave one of the study show that the effects on forgiveness and social capital persisted for up to 31 months after the program ended. However, the negative psychological effects also lasted this long.
- » **The Peace Mothers Groups, communal farms, and Peace Tree did not have large effects.** Program impacts on forgiveness, social capital and psychological health did not differ for men and women, or in places that had communal farms. Nor were there any effects on the resolution of day-to-day disputes, which was the focus of the Peace Tree. This suggests that the truth-telling element of the reconciliation process, with its focus on airing war-time grievances, is the driver of both the positive and negative effects.

Effects of Community Reconciliation

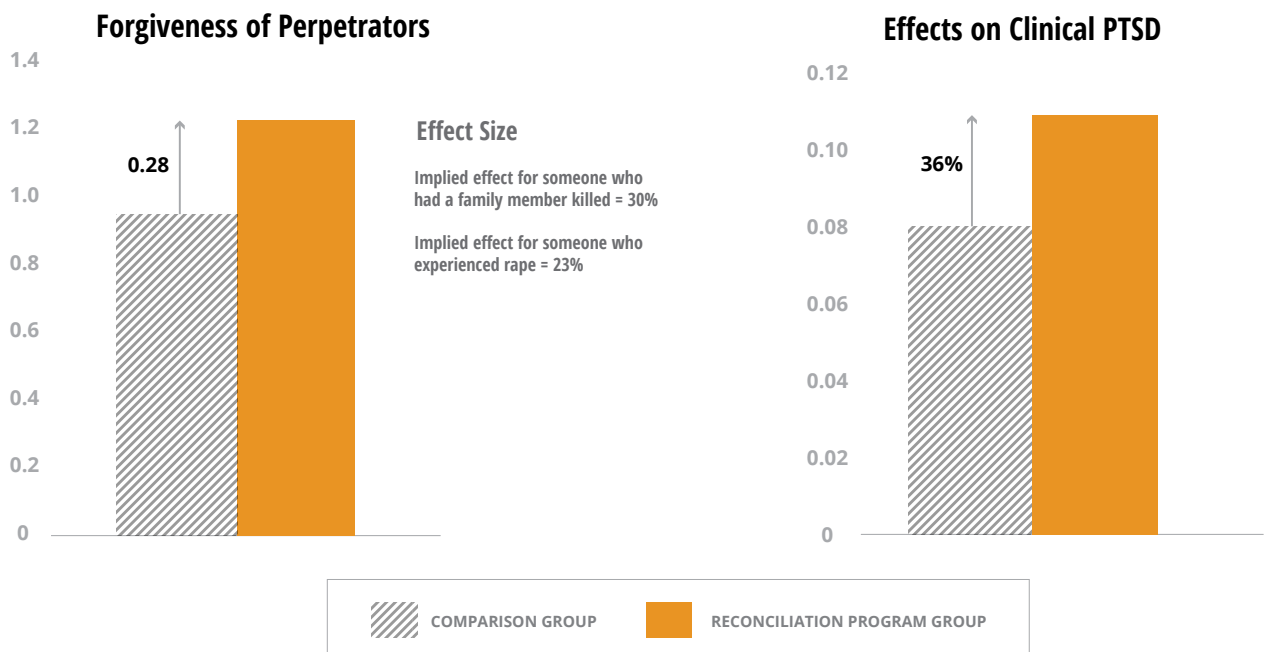




PHOTO: GLENNA GORDON

Conclusions

Reconciliation programs continue to be a common tool used in countries emerging from wars. The results of this research suggest that these programs can help repair social ties and promote social cohesion, but, talking about war atrocities re-opens old war wounds, with negative psychological consequences. These impacts, positive and negative, last for nearly three years after the interventions take place.

Given these persistent, mixed effects, researchers suggest that reconciliation programs should be re-designed to minimize their psychological costs, while retaining their societal benefits.

For example, reconciliation forums may have smaller negative psychological effects if they are held directly at the

end of a war, when people have not attempted to move on in their own way. Also, the psychological effects may be smaller if the reconciliation program is combined with counseling to help individuals cope with traumatic memories. For example, combining these programs with more extensive forgiveness therapies or trauma healing, both of which have been shown to help individuals cope with distressing events, may represent a promising way forward.

Given the prevalence of conflict, and post-conflict reconciliation, more research is needed to examine these alternative approaches for helping societies recover, and move on, from war.

RESEARCHERS

Jacobus Cilliers (Georgetown University)
Oeindrila Dube (New York University)
Bilal Siddiqi (World Bank)

PARTNERS

Fambul Tok International

TOPICS

Conflict, Governance, Peace & Recovery

COUNTRY

Sierra Leone

SAMPLE & TIMELINE

2,200 individuals in 200 villages, 2011-2014

Full study summary and paper are available at: poverty-action.org/node/7251

ICON CREDITS: EUGENE DOBRIK, AARON K. KIM, LUIS PRADO (THE NOUN PROJECT)

Project Development: pd@poverty-action.org | **General Inquiries:** contact@poverty-action.org | www.poverty-action.org

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy non-profit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA designs, rigorously evaluates, and refines these solutions and their applications together with researchers and local decision-makers, ensuring that evidence is used to improve the lives of the world's poor. Our well-established partnerships in the countries where we work, and a strong understanding of local contexts, enable us to conduct high-quality research. This research has informed hundreds of successful programs that now impact millions of individuals worldwide.

