

The First African Commissioner's Conference

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Introduction

Shalom Educating for Peace supported the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in hosting the the first African Commissioner's Conference in Kigali, Rwanda in August 2016. This was the first time commissioners from truth and reconciliation commissions from across Africa, and other interested actors, were able to come together and share lessons learned from their work facilitating national reconciliation processes.

The conference generally used panel discussions and was really able to create opportunities for sharing experiences as a means of peer review between the actors in reconciliation and those building effective structures for truth, unity and reconciliation in Africa.

Strategic networking and partnerships

The conference brought together commissioners from African truth commissions, as well as interested policymakers, analysts, academics and practitioners in the field of transitional justice from thirteen countries.

The gathering enabled exchanges that resulted in establishing inter-commission collaboration and partnership strategies, including the initiation of the Pana-African Reconciliation Network (PAREN). This initiative, undertaken and convened by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, has the objective of creating and maintaining an international platform for practitioners, policy makers, analysts and researchers to dialogue, exchange views, analysis, advice, and publications relating to the challenge of promotion of reconciliation on the continent.

Among other activities to be carried out by the PAREN to advance and support the process of reconciliation, the initiative is specifically expected to: mobilize and strengthen the technical ability of societal actors, national, regional and global institutions to promote issues of reconciliation around the world; develop a database and enable the identification of



practitioners who can travel to assist societies and countries undergoing reconciliation processes; facilitate the exchange of analysis and advice on reconciliation processes through its website, social media, print and broadcast media, opinion articles and academic research; and encourage the adoption of national reconciliation strategies to promote inclusive and free societies.

Evaluating the critical work truth commissioners are engaged in

Bringing these commissions together at this time is critical, as the work they engage in plays an increasingly central role in sustaining peace in local communities, and on national and international levels. Yet the important role these commissions are playing has not been sufficiently explored, and existing structures have insufficient resources and scope to coordinate networks and partnerships. It is this gap that the discussions were mostly focused on. Participants were engaged in an assessment of the achievements of truth commissions on the continent and analysed how the work of truth commissions can be improved by drawing lessons from successes and failures.

Through discussion, participants come to the conclusion that despite local and country-specific circumstances and differences in mandate and power, many commissions had similar working methods and objectives. While there is no blueprint, as countries' pasts and presents vary, all had in common their desire for a more harmonious and unified future.

Challenges that truth commissions face

When analysing and evaluating the various processes seeking truth, justice, unity and reconciliation, several recurring themes and questions emerge. They include challenges related to the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict countries and truth commissions in particular. There are also questions as to what extent the recommendations within truth commissions reports have been implemented. In many cases, the impact of truth commissions is not clear.

Specific challenges that African truth commissions face include a lack of support and participation from governments, civil society and citizens. Participants commended the fact that governments have established the commissions. However when many lack political and financial resource to achieve their mandate and operate effectively.

Reconciliation is understood as a long term process yet many truth commissions are given an unrealistic and limited timeframe. Participants deplored the fact that a number of truth commissions were phased out in the midst of the journey. The constraint of respecting the timeframe leads some commissions to both ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

Many of the commissions have suffered from a lack of clear independence and impartiality, and have had to confront or integrate multiple political calculations.



A critical point of view: The superficiality of the truth commissions work

At a community-level, commissions generally lack the active involvement and participation of people, who should be their direct beneficiaries, and the people's ownership of the commissions' work is very weak.

Another contestation is finding the right balance between a victim-centered and a perpetrator-focused approach. In terms of outcomes, reports tend not to be made publicly available, or are inaccessible to the general public.

In addition, implementation, follow-up and adherence to the recommendations in a truth commission's report is often missing. Truth commissions alone are not able to deal with the trauma resulting from the horrors of the past, they require follow up mechanisms and their work must go beyond the mandated period. In addition to and extending on the issues and questions raised above, delays, the lack of transparency, exclusivity, the lack of powers, poorly educated staff and too broad, or too limited mandates are all difficulties TRC's have had to deal with.

Shalom was honored to host such an important gathering

Shalom Educating for Peace Rwanda is proud to have played an important role in organizing such an event about the effectiveness of the commissions and how they can be more efficient and accountable.

Local NGOs working in the field of reconciliation are generally not very involved in the establishment of truth commissions. How NGOs and truth commissions should interact and intersect is also not very clear. Some commissions or other governmental structures working in reconciliation and peacebuilding processes behave as regulators and/or coordinators of the local NGOs whereas, at the same time, they pursue a political agenda.

Though the issue of collaboration with the truth commissions and local NGOs was not deeply discussed during the conference in Kigali, for Shalom Educating for Peace Rwanda it was an opportunity not only to share its field experience in reconciliation, but also to show the

imperative for these kinds of conferences. We see a real need for platforms, at national and community-levels, where academics, politicians and practitioners meet, discuss and develop effective approaches of ensuring sustainable reconciliation and durable peace.

For the host organization, the conference was organized in the framework of reinforcing capacities of community-level structures for reconciliation efforts. As the work of the truth commissions affect – in one way or another - the interventions undertaken by grass-roots groups, it is very useful to look at and interrogate different approaches that the truth commissions are applying and how the local communities are benefiting from their existence.

In addition, in actively participating in such a high level gathering where multiple stakeholders intervening in reconciliation analyse the challenges that the truth commissions are facing and contribute to overcoming them, we ensure the voice of local peacebuilders heard. As a local organization, the discussions held during the conference were a way to realize gaps in the process and provided opportunity to share lesson learns from work at the grassroots.

It is also worth noting that the fact that this event was co-organised and convened by non-government organizations is a reminder that the civil society organizations have to have a say in the process. It is a way to express the willingness of creating a space free of political calculations which, in many cases can destabilize the process of reconciliation.

The African context compels us towards building effective structures of reconciliation



At the closing session of the conference, I reminded the participants that the contemporary African context invites and compels us to enormously invest in reconciliation. Many African countries are perceived as divided societies, with a context that undermines efforts for socio-economic development. This context justifies the necessity of establishing effective structure for sustainable reconciliation.

The conference underlined that reconciliation is the framework for healing and recovery, truth-telling, forgiveness and repair of harm done, restoring relationships, calming fear, trust-building, reconsidering the interconnectedness of human beings and commitment to righting injustice and addressing the consequences of historic wrongs as ways of breaking the circle of violence.

A successful and sustainable reconciliation process requires freedom, empathy, equality and inclusiveness. It is essential that the needs of everyone are met, including those at the local level, in order to achieve the ultimate end of restoring relationships and interconnectedness.