

Healthy Cooperatives: A remedy against loneliness and economic hardship?

By Mathias Krams, intern at SEP

“African society lives what you can call a community life. In this context the Rwandan government is encouraging people to work and develop their economic standing by working in cooperatives. However, when people gather in cooperatives, they may lack capacities to resolve and transform conflicts. As a consequence, cooperatives can collapse”, Jean de Dieu Basabose explains. “But we think that conflict can be a catalyst for development within cooperatives.”

The pickup departs from Kigali and leaves behind the sound of horns and the noise of rattling motors of the motorcycle taxis which thread their way through the queue of cars that move in a stop-start-mode through the narrow streets of Rwanda’s capital. The breeze that enters through the window gap carries a fragrance of exhaust fumes which is increasingly blended with red dust.

Jean de Dieu has dedicated his life to building peace. The violent historical background of his native country Rwanda motivated him to study ‘Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies’ in South Africa. Now, as a trained peace practitioner, he decided to put his “passion to work for peace” into practice and to follow his conviction that what he does is what he is here for. He feels a responsibility to support the “development of peace education as a way to prevent the reoccurrence of the horrible past including genocide, war and other multi-faceted conflicts the country has experienced in the past”. Today he is driving to a cooperative of coffee growers in Rulindo district, in Northern Province of Rwanda. One of his activities as executive director of ‘Shalom Educating for Peace’ (SEP) is to equip members of the cooperative with the skills to resolve and transform conflicts. Jean de Dieu believes that when transformed in a non-violent way these conflicts can actually be a catalyst for development in the cooperatives which helps to strengthen social cohesion and lead to a better management of the cooperatives. He sees an impact of SEP’s training programme not only on the cooperative but also on the entire society. Participants of the programme are supposed to act as conciliation facilitators within their cooperative, but also contribute to resolving conflicts that arise in their community.

The street we drive along is lined by a milling crowd: Women in long colourful dresses, people carrying packages on their heads and small children on their back. From time to time joyful music sounds out of small shops. Today Jean de Dieu is accompanied by Claudette, who is working as chief administrator at Starbucks Rwanda and is monitoring the project. She is sitting on the rear seat bench of the pickup, sandwiched between cardboard boxes containing coffee samples and technical equipment for a later presentation. She explains that a high number of prevalent conflicts in the cooperative were the reasons why Starbucks Rwanda decided to support this pilot project in cooperation with SEP. From her perspective after the first five training sessions the project already bears fruit. When Starbucks is having meetings with the cooperative the participants demonstrate a stronger participation, are more open and ask more questions compared to the time before the programme started. For this reason she can also imagine, that if the project demonstrates to be a success, it could be expanded to further cooperatives.

The street gets increasingly bumpy. The windows must be closed due to the red dust clouds which are churned up by the speeding car. Outside the window, banana plantations alternate with barren trees and single huts. Children in school uniforms clown around on the side of the road. We finally

arrive at the building where the session is going to take place. It also houses the offices of several sector administrators.



On the road to Rulindo district (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

A group of women have already assembled in a large room with one wall embellished by huge banners in Rwanda's national colours and a portrait of President Kagame. After moving some benches and distributing small bottles of water, the session begins. Because the date of this meeting had been changed at short notice, only 15 people, all women, of the total 25 participants can attend. The session starts with reporting on conflicts and problems the participants face in the cooperative. One woman stands up, positions herself behind a bench and talks with a resolute voice: About cancelled cooperative-committee meetings, nepotistic and unilateral practices in managing the cooperative and uncooperative behaviour during a goat distribution project. The other participants are listening attentively and subsequently comment on what has been said. After the problems have been discussed and further action has been agreed on, Jean de Dieu starts with the first part of this day's session: 'Respecting and celebrating differences among each other within cooperatives'.



The Masoro sector administrative building (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

RTCC Project

The 'Resolving and Transforming Conflicts in Cooperatives'- project is carried out through a tri-partite partnership between Starbucks Rwanda, 'Shalom Educating for Peace' and local government authorities of Masoro sector and Rulindo district. Starbucks invites the cooperative members, provides the participants with training materials and lunches. Starbucks also offers transportation for trainers to the training venue. SEP provides the training based on a participatory and interactive methodology. The local authorities make premises available for the training sessions.



Female coffee growers gathered for the training session (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

Bugingo Ildephonse, Cooperative Officer of the government for the Masoro sector has his office just next door. He is sitting upright behind his desk in a small, sparse furnished room. His hands rest diplomatically folded on his desk and, over his shoulders, the light of the midday sun passes through the half-opened venetian blinds. His job, he describes, is to support the cooperative in writing reports and to inform them about and to control the requirements which need to be fulfilled in order to become a registered NGO. In his opinion SEP's programme is a good initiative which can help the farmers to solve their problems within the cooperative and to manage their financial issues. In this way the efficiency of the cooperative can be increased and he also assumes a positive impact on the private life of the participants. He says that he knows of cooperatives which were destroyed due to conflicts, especially concerning financial issues. For that reason he believes in the importance of teaching conflict resolution skills to the farmers.



Bugingo Ildephonse serves as intermediary between cooperative and government department (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

Cooperatives in Rwanda

Rwanda's economy is mainly based on agriculture which is carried out by small farmers. In order to improve the efficiency of the agricultural sector the national government aims at increasing the number of cooperatives in the country. This should lead to a greater degree of organisation, allow for the pooling of resources and open up the possibility for even small farmers to receive loans.

The 25 farmers participating in the programme had been selected by the cooperative based on their ability to read and write. They are supposed to act as mediators who transmit the learned content to the wider community and to other farmers. Hereof some are open and interested and show respect for the participants, others are slower to comprehend or even regard the programme as a waste of time, the participants report. Most of the farmers that take part in the programme are women. This reflects the composition of the cooperative, in which 62 women and only 6 men are organized. One participant explains that this is the case because women are more willing to organize themselves in cooperatives. But also the high number of dead or imprisoned men as a consequence of the genocide seems to have impacted today's low percentage of male coffee farmers in this cooperative. For the women participating in the programme the teaching has been supportive in the process of self-development and has given them the skills to solve problems in their households. One woman explains that when she comes home after a full day of training, her husband is often angry. But now she knows how to deal with this conflict. Other skills they have learned so far are to forgive and how to start a process of reconciliation, a women reports. Skills which directly impact the whole community and strengthen Rwandan society.



Participants of the training session watching a movie on reconciliation (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

Diagonally opposite of Mr. Ildephonse's office, in a similar looking room, the person responsible for social issues in the Masoro sector has his office. Eduard, a motivated and joyful looking man, talks to an old citizen who is clinging tightly to some documents. The motivation for his work can be read from the way he interacts with his client. "If the work I do is good, I perceive it as a blessing". Also he deals with conflicts in his daily work. Mainly minor conflicts which arise in families and the community. He thinks that SEP's conflict resolution programme can have a positive impact by enabling the participants to solve conflicts by themselves and inside their families. As a consequence they do not need to consult his assistance anymore to solve them.

Meanwhile the women have engaged in a deep discussion. Four women grouped in pairs are opposing each other and are passionately exchanging arguments about the impact of differences among the members on the cooperative. The spectators are attentively following the argumentation, one time giving comments another time cheerfully laughing. In the end, the group promoting a positive impact of differences has the better arguments, of course! Before the lunch break Claudette informs the farmers about differences in the quality of coffee beans and gives them advice on how to raise the quality of their harvest. Then finally, while sitting in the backyard of a restaurant down the hill, they have the opportunity to taste the coffee, brewed out of the coffee beans they handle during their daily work. This moment has long been anticipated and fills their faces with pride and after a couple of teaspoons of sugar also with a big, satisfied smile. The break gives the participants and the facilitators the opportunity to strengthen themselves with grilled meat and bananas as well as the omnipresent Coca-Cola-sodas. Thereafter the group of women starts out to their next session with Jean de Dieu on 'components of sustainable peace'.



A fiery discussion on the impact of differences within the cooperative (Photograph: Mathias Krams)



Coffee-tasting session before lunch at the restaurant (Photograph: Mathias Krams)

One woman among the coffee farmers is sitting in the corner of the room on one of the white plastic chairs. The forearms supported on a folded cloth which covers her lap. Due to the genocide, she lost her husband. Now she is alone, with her children and a coffee-plantation. This does not only signify an economic hardship for her, but also hours of loneliness. Her seatmate names the many conflicts that they experience in their families, the wider community and their coffee-farmer-cooperative. They do not appear to be discouraged but motivated and determined to change their situation for the better. Jean de Dieu seems to be a bit exhausted after such a full day of teaching but nevertheless satisfied having contributed to strengthening the cooperative and seeing the positive reactions of the participants. Together with the collaborators of Starbucks he starts off for another 45 minute drive along the curvy, dusty road towards Kigali.