

Pilot field research in East Congo: Conclusive remarks

The object of loss is written across the bodies of the people,
as it repeats in the silence that speaks the foreignness of language.

Homi Bhabha (1990:315).

As a first conclusion, we want to focus on the difficulties we met during this preliminary phase of the research, preventing us from reaching some objectives and realizing some planned activities. These difficulties refer mostly to two main factors: first, the persistence of conflicts and tensions in East-Congo; second, the high level of social de-structuralization due to the prolonged war.

The ongoing tensions constitute obviously a serious obstacle to field research. In many cases, our local investigators were not able to reach rural zones to make interviews because of complete lack of security. Even the urban areas, particularly Bunia and Goma, have always been at the centre of low-level fighting, presenting at the same time a high degree of criminality. Furthermore, during our last mission (June 2005), a group of soldiers, apparently a platoon of the new National Army (FARDC), surrounded our house in Beni and we were obliged to evacuate the country taking some serious risks on the road to Uganda. These continual stressful situations have constituted both a practical and a deontological limit of our work: on the one hand we were not able to implement our planned activities; on the other hand we could not expose our team, our interlocutors and ourselves to these extreme risks.

Apart from security, the serious breakdown of the social fabric has been another great obstacle for our work during the preparatory phase. In fact, during these last months we could observe the persistence of an high level of mistrust and hate among the different communities. This prevented us and our team from observing, as much as we expected, some encouraging social practices, such as public ceremonies of re-pacification, as well as supporting some reconciliation activities, such as communities or leaders meeting. Regarding local NGOs, we noticed a strong competition among them: this implies a risk of excessive fragmentation and, in the absence of a trustful cooperation, it weakens their potential.

Nevertheless, the difficulties mentioned above can not induce us to a pessimistic attitude vis-à-vis the possibility of a “real” and effective process of reconciliation in East Congo. On the contrary, the understanding of the deep and complex roots of the Congolese crisis is a first step towards the individuation of more effective and realistic strategies of intervention which could be enforced in the future. By now, because of the present context and

the limited time of our research, which was still in a preliminary phase, we wish to present some conclusions which could constitute a general framework for further research/action in community rehabilitation in this area.

A general conclusion of our preliminary research is that community rehabilitation often means *re-inventing community*. By this we want to suggest that the dimensions of trauma are individual as much as collective, and therefore the politics of memory which one intends to explicitly or implicitly pursue in peace-building programs should concern both these poles of suffering (Bracken and Petty 1998).

Moreover, we also need to know and recognize the existing resources, *promoting* recourse to these, where they are recognized by the local participants as pertinent, instead of opting for generalized exportations of models, interpretations, therapeutic practices. For instance, in spite of some contradictions on the role of traditional medicine, the actions undertaken with traditional healers for children traumatized by war and from being child soldiers bear witness to the success of strategies deeply rooted in the social and cultural context.

In general, we have to distinguish between the cultural dimension of conflict and presumed ethnic causes of the conflicts in order to avoid the reproduction of a dangerous myth: that violent human conflict is caused by a ‘clash of cultures’ between ethnic groups. Many scholars, as well as The Human Development Report 2004 of the United Nations Development Program say that, while many conflicts have a cultural dimension, people construct for themselves multiple cultural identities and that cultural differences are not the primary source of conflicts. On the contrary, they may even reduce the risk of conflict by making group mobilization more difficult.

What we would like to underline is the necessity to recognize the existence of different strategies of healing or rehabilitating war and violent traumatic experiences, as well as different ways of remembering¹ or “being in the history” (Bloch). As Rosalinda Shaw wrote (2000: 2), “there are other ways of remembering the past than by speaking of it”. These differences can make it difficult to adopt universal rehabilitation strategies, but are essential if

¹ With regard to post-conflict Sri Lanka, Argenti-Pillen (2003) has shown that communities destroyed by violence do not tend to explicitly evince discourses regarding their predicament, but rather adopt indirect forms of speech. In contrast to the western emphasis on confession and dialogue as beneficial therapies, victims and perpetrators can live side by side avoid accusing each other openly and detecting the crimes of the past.

we want to adopt effective strategies. Or, to put it a different way, we would like to remind the reader that suffering, memory of dramatic experiences or burial rituals do not concern only “symptoms” or “disorders caused by unusual stress”, but a political and moral register too. For instance, some traditional healing strategies, appropriately articulate deletions and reformulation of collective traumatic experiences in very efficient ways (through customary, religious ceremonies, etc.).

Ways of forgetting sometimes form an essential part of the everyday construction and creation of identities, and contribute to solving conflicts and dealing with the experience of collective estrangement that dominates in times of war. However, if forgetting or reinventing identity and ties can represent a survival strategy (both collective and individual) contributing to the interruption of the cycle of violence and death, they cannot constitute a prescription for political action. Moreover, they can give the impression of being ambiguous when people are interested in building strategies against impunity and domination. The delicate balance between forgetting and remembering cannot be imagined as the simple product of individual choice. This balance is affected by a number of factors: cultural strategies, moral questions, ways in which memories are constructed and narrative landscapes, and the particular ways in which communities define their relationship to the past: “Remembering is a purposeful activity (...) The past is always available, for good and for ill” (Summeffield 2001).

It is certainly not possible to suggest general solutions. However, based on our experience in East Congo, we can affirm the usefulness of experimenting with strategies of rehabilitation based on the local resources of resilience.

In fact, a balanced articulation between local actors and external actors, between cultural strategies and intervention rooted in different types of knowledge, can constitute the best strategy for managing complex interactions and different profiles of suffering. However, we repeat, no generalizations can be allowed. Most of all, no proposal can forget the power relations and structure of domination that often make the strategies mentioned above impracticable. The reality of the Ituri and Kivu, with its war fronts and a large number of children and adolescents enrolled in local militias, certainly represents a challenging testing ground for the strategies mentioned in this report. Nevertheless, individuals who suffer, perhaps those who suffer the most, are often those who are the most invisible. We are thinking, above all, of the hidden victims of violence, often forgotten by international agencies: how

many programs concern the silent, enduring consequences of rape in girls and young women? Who takes into consideration the devastating psychological and family effects of such violence? Who prosecutes those responsible for these criminal acts? In our experience, it is necessary to find opportune places and occasions so that these people can feel recognized in their fragility, recognized once more as *people*, able to be recognized by their acts, not only as generic *victims*.

Desire for vendetta can surely be an obstacle or make it difficult to carry out these interventions: expressing these feelings does not mean having a mental illness, as many studies would have us believe. What one person considers a vendetta could signify an act of social justice for another. With regard to this last aspect, many scholars have noted that social healing or rehabilitation processes cannot be successfully accomplished without social justice or when impunity constitutes the everyday rule.