



from the September 10, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0910/p09s01-coop.html>

Rwanda's advice for budding democracies: dialogue clubs

In war-torn communities trying to rebuild, talk isn't cheap – it's progress.

By Jeffrey Lewis and Karin Miller-Lewis

Kigali, Rwanda

As the world considers how to help Iraq and other war-torn nations rebuild themselves, we'd do well to observe efforts under way in Rwanda.

Like other countries shattered by extreme violence, Rwanda faced tremendous obstacles to stability after the 1994 genocide killed almost 1 million Rwandans. And there were no traditions of democracy to build on.

Yet this July, we saw the democracy-building work of "dialogue clubs." In the five districts where dialogue clubs have been active since 2003, they have promoted reconciliation, made possible new means of economic cooperation and development, and fostered new engagement by parliamentarians with their constituencies.

They're part of Rwandans' efforts to strengthen civil society, which they recognize as crucial for national unity, democratic values, and enduring political institutions.

Dialogue clubs have been organized by the Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace (IRDP), a Rwandan nongovernmental organization, with the help of the international NGO Interpeace. The clubs meet several times a month to discuss how to create a future for communities torn apart by the genocide, which was orchestrated by the extremist Hutu power against the minority Tutsi population. Peace was restored, but survivors and perpetrators of mass killings, rape, and thievery continued to live side by side.

Each dialogue group is made up of ordinary men and women who lost family in the genocide as well as those with family members accused of genocide crimes. Most participants are subsistence farmers, but each group also includes teachers, merchants, and local administrators. A facilitator, selected and trained by IRDP after canvassing of the local constituencies, moderates discussion in each group.

How did people with such a divisive history begin to talk about the tough issues facing their country? Facilitators encouraged dialogue clubs to focus on rebuilding their local economies. As a result of group discussions, members have invested in high-quality breeds of cows and goats or worked together to plant crops on land collectively leased. In a country of barely viable small farms, these income-generating agricultural projects have provided a model for local economic development – in August, the minister of agriculture called for the clubs' expansion to all 30 districts of the country.

These economic ventures have also established bonds among club members, enabling discussions of difficult social and political issues, such as overpopulation. Rwanda's economic development will be hard-pressed to keep pace with the population, expected to double within 20 years. But traditionally, poor farmers have relied on large families to help support aging parents. Some Tutsis see efforts to curb population growth as unfairly restricting their ability to reconstitute families decimated by the genocide.

In a single-story cement administrative building in Rwanda's coffee-growing hills, we observed the members of the Kabagali Dialogue Club debate the touchy subject with calm and respect, helping people see one another's perspectives.

"We shouldn't have to change our traditional ways," said one middle-aged man.

"Poverty helped make us vulnerable to the genocide, and there is too little land to divide among many children," a younger man responded. "Wouldn't you rather have just three children and be able to give them all a future?"

Periodically, IRDP videotapes these club meetings and shows them to other regional clubs to help foster dialogue at a national level. The videotapes, as well as a summary of the key subjects addressed in the discussions, have also been shared with 200 of the country's political, religious, and business leaders.

The iterative debate by and between local groups and national leaders creates a culture of public discourse that improves communication between the central government and provincial groups. Lawmakers are seeing the necessity and benefits of being responsive to the concerns of their constituencies – national leaders have developed an agenda based on club discussions. Meanwhile villagers are learning to assess public policy issues, articulate their interests, and build consensus.

These steps may seem small. We in more mature democracies take public debate for granted; talk has become cheap. But for a country ravaged by ethnic violence, it has been crucial to the rebuilding process. Democracies are predicated on mutual trust. The sustained interactions of the dialogue clubs are helping Rwandans to rebuild that trust.

Later in the Kabagali Club meeting that we attended, an elderly woman interrupted the discussion. "I can no longer be a part of this club," she announced. Another member had accused her family of stealing a cow during the genocide.

As others in the group tried to calm her anger, a neighboring farmer took the floor. "For some time we have been working together, we have been feeling as one," he said. "If we can do that, we can surely discuss charges that your family ate someone else's meat. You should remain a member of the club, and we'll discuss and resolve this problem."

•*Jeffrey Lewis is a senior partner at Cleary Gottlieb Steen and Hamilton LLP, in New York, and a member of the US board of governors of Interpeace. Karin Miller-Lewis is writing a novel for teenagers about guilt and innocence in Nazi Germany.*

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