

# Chapter 9

## Community Reconciliation and Post-Conflict Reconstruction for Peace

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### Introduction

Contemporary armed conflicts are no longer fought on well-defined battlefields, but in and around communities (Machel 2001; Wessells 1998), which are targeted directly or subjected to terror tactics such as suicide bombings. As a result, communities suffer enormous physical damage, including losses of homes, schools, livelihoods, health facilities, and other infrastructure.

Although this damage transforms the physical landscape, war prompts an even greater transformation of social relations, creating a full-blown culture of war. At the societal level, war strengthens institutions such as armies and ministries of defense, heightens military spending, and creates an environment in which war propaganda and enemy images flourish. At the community level, war and violence become normalized and woven into the fabric of daily life. Not uncommonly, communities organize militias in hopes of protecting villagers against attacks, and markets and places of worship may become sites for recruitment. In addition, the mass displacement and hardships of war shatter communities, reducing people to a state of desperate competition over necessities such as food, water, and shelter. As social cohesion plummets and norms of law and order and other social controls weaken, the doors open ever wider to spreading violence and lawlessness.

The burdens of this social transformation fall disproportionately on children, who are defined under international law as people under 18 years of age and who typically comprise half the population in war-torn countries. Owing to the physical deprivations and hardships, war causes soaring mortality rates for children under five years of age. In many armed conflicts, particularly protracted ones that last a decade or more, children may grow up with war as a constant part of their daily lives and have no reference point for conceptualizing peace. Having observed adults using violence as a means of handling conflict, children tend to see violence as appropriate and even glamorous. Indeed, for children who feel powerless and have been deprived of reliable access to food, water, and security, the opportunity to wear a uniform and wield a gun carries a heady power and the opportunity to “be someone” (Brett and Specht 2004). Also, wars enable the brutal exploitation of

children. In recent wars in Africa, large numbers of children were forcibly recruited through abduction. In this manner, they became part of the approximately 250,000 children who are believed to be in armed forces or groups at any particular moment and who have become an essential part of the global war system (Machel 2001; Wessells 2006).

To break this war system and to convert a culture of war into a culture of peace is no small feat; it requires careful attention to community reconciliation and peacebuilding. Although the signing of a ceasefire often elicits much joy, many communities continue to live in what can only be regarded as a culture of war. Not uncommonly, the death toll increases following the cessation of conflict as disease, crime, and lack of access to basic services exact a heavy toll (Collier et al. 2003). Violence after the accord may be widespread owing to crime and banditry, much of which is perpetrated by former soldiers who retain their military identities and see no way of meeting their needs through lawful activity in civilian life. Often, the breakdown of social controls, including the low capacity of the police and judicial systems, enables gender-based violence to occur on a wide scale. Amidst these difficulties, local communities may feel disconnected from wider, societal processes of building a culture of peace. As one elder in Sierra Leone said, "I was hungry before the war. I was hungry during the war. And now I am still hungry..." A significant challenge, then, is to build a culture of peace at community level following armed conflict and all the physical and social destruction it has wrought.

A key component of building a culture of peace following armed conflict is the reintegration of children and youth who have been soldiers. The reintegration of young people is a societal obligation enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet it is also a high priority from a peacebuilding perspective. Without having a place in civilian life, youth may return to the gun, becoming mercenaries abroad or continuing cycles of violence in their own societies (Human Rights Watch 2005; Wessells 2006). At the village level, powerful fears of returning child soldiers can impede reintegration, and there may be reprisal attacks on people who are viewed as enemies or traitors. These fears, tensions, and attacks at the community level can derail peace processes and pose significant challenges to building a culture of peace. However, it is important to avoid focusing in too singular a manner on formerly recruited young people. Since all young people in war zones have suffered, and those who have been displaced also need to be reintegrated, it is important to support all war-affected young people (Machel 2001). Also, excessive focus on one particular group can spark jealousies that divide rather than reconcile community members with each other.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine diverse methods of community reconciliation and peacebuilding following armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing that the study of community reconciliation is still in its formative stages and is dominated by Western approaches, I will present brief case studies from relatively non-Westernized contexts. Three case studies from Angola, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, respectively, emphasize reconciling formerly recruited young people, defined as people under 25 years of age, with communities in rural areas. The focus on young people is appropriate since they are increasingly influential

political actors and fighters, yet they often receive little attention in post-conflict environments (Sommers 2005; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2001). They often face significant challenges of reconciliation with communities, who may regard them as perpetrators. The focus on rural areas is valuable. Being far from the central government, they can be likely places of operation for spoilers or people who, frustrated by the poor performance of the government, take up arms to overthrow it. Although the case studies emphasize the importance of community empowerment and reliance on local cultural understandings and practices, they will also point out the value of constructive partnerships between Western psychology and local practices.

### **Angola: Cultural Approaches to Community Reconciliation**

The Angolan wars began in 1961 as a liberation struggle from Portugal. Following liberation in 1975, several groups struggled for power. The primary struggle was between the socialist government and UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, which received extensive backing from the US and South Africa during the Cold War years as part of the effort to contain communism (Minter 1994). Although a durable ceasefire was achieved in 2002 following the killing of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, there were enormous needs for peacebuilding, reestablishing security and the rule of law, and meeting basic needs.

Following intensive fighting in the early 1990s, an interim peace accord was signed in 1994. A high priority was for community reconciliation that would enable formerly recruited children to transition into civilian life. At that time, reintegration efforts typically focused on meeting basic necessities and on helping young people to earn a livelihood. Community reconciliation was typically not viewed as part of the reintegration process, and even when it was, the thinking reflected mostly Western ideas. In the context of rural Angola, where traditions ran strong, Western approaches, which emphasize material processes (contact, communication, conciliation activities, etc.) that improve social relationships, had limited currency.

An essential first step, one that required taking an anthropological perspective, was to understand how local people and the formerly recruited young people themselves understood the problem. To achieve this perspective, the staff of Christian Children's Fund (CCF)/Angola used ethnographic methods to map the local understandings of the situation of formerly recruited young people and to gain a window on the subjective understandings of the children and youth themselves. Interestingly, both the young and villagers viewed the main barriers to reintegration as spiritual in nature. For example, one 14-year-old boy who had been recruited said he was unable to sleep and was unfit for normal life as a civilian. Although his combination of nightmares and social avoidance fit the general pattern of post-traumatic stress disorder (Green et al. 2003), he viewed his problem in spiritual terms, saying "I cannot sleep at night because the spirit of the man I killed comes to me and asks 'Why did you do this to me?'" Queried further, the boy said he feared the angry

spirit of the man he had killed and believed the spirit could harm him and anyone he came into contact with, including family and community members.

Local villagers agreed with the boy's understanding. According to the *soba* (traditional chief) of the boy's village, the living have an obligation to honor the ancestors by performing traditions. One of these traditions is to have an appropriate local healer conduct a cleansing ritual for soldiers who have killed people and are haunted by angry spirits. To fail to conduct such a ritual is to place the boy, his family, and the village at risk of harm caused by the angry spirits. For both the boy and the *soba*, then, the problem is neither individual nor material, but collective and spiritual. Because the problem is spiritual, local people believe that it needs to be addressed by the conduct of a purification ritual that will cleanse the boy of his spiritual impurities and relieve the community of their fears (Wessells and Monteiro 2001).

Undergirding these beliefs is the worldview that events in the visible world are caused by events in the invisible world of the ancestors. Ordinarily, the ancestors protect the living. Yet when they are not honored through the practice of traditions, the ancestors may remove their protection or cause direct harm. According to one elder, "The ancestral spirits can help you, but they can also harm you...if they feel neglected they can punish people by provoking illness or can even cause death" (Honwana 1998, p. 21).

Viewing spiritual reconciliation as a necessary component of the reintegration of former boy soldiers, CCF/Angola worked extensively in the period 1996–1998 with communities and traditional healers, who identified which children needed to be cleansed and who then conducted the appropriate cleansing rituals. The focus was on boy soldiers because it was thought at the time of the project that there were few girls who had been recruited, an assumption that turned out to be fallacious (Stavrou 2005).

The rituals were not isolated events, but were preceded by a period of fasting, adherence to a special diet, and moral tutelage by the healers. When a healer believed a boy was ready to be cleansed, he announced the ceremony to the village, prompting their attendance. The rituals varied across regions, yet had numerous features in common. Typically, the healer demarcated a safe space by burning around its perimeter sacred herbs believed to ward off angry spirits. Inside the safe space, the healers unclothed and ritually bathed the former soldier, using special soaps and herbs to expunge the evil spirits. This external washing was often accompanied by fumigation in which the former soldier sat with a blanket over his head, breathing the vapor of selected herbs to expunge bad spirits. Also, the healer usually made an offering in the form of a sacrificed animal or money to the angry spirits as a means of reconciliation. At the end of the ceremony, the healer announced the boy's purity and transition. In one area, the healer invited the boy to step across the threshold, out of the safe space, announcing as the boy stepped that "This boy's life as a soldier has now ended—he is now a civilian and can join with us as he wishes." In another area, the healer had the boy bury his military uniform and weapons, announcing as he did so that the boy was no longer a soldier, but a civilian.

In both these cases and 20 others that the CCF team had documented, the boy reported that following the ritual, he felt able to participate with his family and community without any fear of angry spirits (Wessells and Monteiro 2004). Although these cases involved boys, cleansing rituals have also been shown to support the reintegration of formerly recruited girls in countries such as Sierra Leone (Wessells 2006). Similarly, community members indicated that they no longer feared the formerly recruited boys since the rituals had purged the bad spirits and reestablished spiritual harmony with the ancestors. Whether this approach to reconciliation is more impactful than others remains a subject for future research. Still, this preliminary evidence suggests that spiritual reconciliation plays an important role in enabling good relations with the community and aiding reintegration (Honwana 2006; Wessells 2006).

The importance of spiritual reconciliation as part of communal peacebuilding in Angola has also been visible in the return home of displaced people, who comprised nearly one-third of the population at the height of the conflict. A significant challenge to resettlement following war years and in some cases decades of displacement was people's fear of angry spirits that had not been honored through the conduct of appropriate burial rites. For example, Kuito, the capital city of Bie Province, had been the site of house-to-house fighting in which large numbers of people had been killed, but had not received the funeral rites or *obito* owing to displacement and the presence of snipers. When people returned to Kuito following the war, they expressed strong fear that they would be attacked by angry spirits, leading many people to avoid going out at night. Also, many people believed that additional violence would erupt because the spirits of the people who had not been buried properly were angry. In rural areas, people believed that even the war itself had had spiritual causes, making it important to address these concerns. The situation was fragile since tensions already existed between long-term residents and returnees, and the occurrence of any fighting could escalate rapidly in the absence of law and order.

An enigma was how to conduct the local burial rituals, which required having the bodies. Most bodies were unavailable, and it was unlikely that an exhumations process would uncover all the bodies that required proper burial. Lacking guidance and established procedures on how to handle this situation, the local healers convened a meeting of healers. Fortunately, they agreed that a combination of exhumations and mass burial rituals would make it possible to reestablish spiritual harmony with the ancestors. First, exhumations around people's homes enabled the recovery of the remains of many unburied people, some of whom were identified using forensic methods. Next, in the presence of the residents and returnees, the healers conducted a mass burial rite for all those who had died there during the war. Afterwards, residents and returnees reported having less fear. As tensions relaxed, people became eager to meet and help each other even at night, and norms of neighborliness returned.

This case study yields valuable insights regarding reconciliation theory and praxis. For one thing, Western conceptualizations of reconciliation, which emphasize the importance of improving social relationships among the living, are inherently limited

and context-bound. The Angolan case illustrates that reconciliation is a cultural construct, the meaning of which is grounded in the local context. For most rural Angolans, the social and the spiritual are inextricably interconnected, and the spiritual domain is the dominant causal force behind human behavior. To give due attention to spiritual approaches and local means of reconciliation, it is valuable to pay attention to indigenous psychologies and local understandings (Kim and Park 2007; Moghaddam et al. 2007). Indeed, being open to different cultural constructions of reconciliation and culture of peace is an important part of building peace in a highly diverse world. To overlook or marginalize local understandings and practices risks making psychology a tool of neo-colonialism in which Western approaches are privileged while local, indigenous approaches are portrayed as inferior (Dawes and Cairns 1998; Wessells 1999).

With regard to praxis, an important issue is sustainability. Too often, externally driven approaches come to an abrupt end when the funding for them has dried up. Although the problem is often seen as lack of long-term funding, the deeper issue is that the externally imposed approaches may have little basis in the local culture and social norms. For these and other reasons, local beliefs and practices regarding reconciliation warrant careful attention and use in peacebuilding programs, provided that they do not violate international human rights standards and the humanitarian imperative of Do No Harm.

## Sierra Leone: A Superordinate Goals Approach

The recent war in Sierra Leone began as a spillover from the war in neighboring Liberia and ran from 1991 until May 2001. Animated in no small part by a struggle to control areas rich in resources such as timber and diamonds (Richards 1996), the war was notorious for its bloodiness, including the amputation of civilians' limbs by machete-wielding soldiers, some of whom were children. The war displaced large numbers of people, devastated infrastructure, and left in its wake a population that had the shortest life expectancy of any UN member state.

The war created powerful needs for community reconciliation in two complementary respects. Intercommunally, the war had forced neighboring villages into a harsh competition to meet survival needs, such as those for food, water, and shelter. In place of former intervillage activities and attitudes that "my neighbors are my friends," the war created a spirit of distrust and isolation that was inimical to civil society. Intracommunally, villagers harbored deep fears about what would happen when the soldiers returned home. Particularly feared were the members of the former rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who had committed many war-time atrocities and who were often seen as bloodthirsty predators and troublemakers. Even parents feared that their formerly recruited sons and daughters, many of whom engaged in unruly behavior and abused alcohol and other substances, might kill them. Community people doubted that former RUF members, including children, were capable of being contributing citizens. These fears

and doubts, coupled with concerns about reprisal attacks against the former RUF members, created the need to reconcile returning former soldiers with community members. Also, some adults feared that the intergroup fighting during the war between the RUF and the village militias that had sprung up to oppose the RUF would be played out in the villages. Indeed, in the Northern Province, former child soldiers who had fought on opposing sides were returning to the villages, and few plans were in place to reduce intergroup tensions. In this respect, there was a strong need to reconcile members of formerly opposed groups with each other.

To address this situation, CCF/Sierra Leone used a superordinate goals approach aimed at defusing tensions and building positive intergroup relations through cooperation on a shared goals (Deutsch 2000; Sherif et al. 1961). The work focused on the Northern Province since this region had been the RUF stronghold at the end of the war, experienced ongoing intergroup and intercommunal tensions, and had significant numbers of formerly recruited children returning home. CCF focused on the well-being of young people because this was within their agency mandate of supporting children's healthy development and protection. Also, although some programs had been set up in the region to support the reintegration of adult former soldiers, there were relatively few supports for children. The initial focus was on formerly recruited boys since they posed the greatest threat to security, yet in other projects, the focus was on the reintegration of formerly recruited girls (Wessells 2006). CCF worked through staff who were Sierra Leonean and understood the local language, culture, and situation.

To enable cooperation between villages, CCF staff facilitated community dialogues in which four or five neighboring villages each elected representatives through a democratic process to participate in discussions as one community. This strategy was designed to reduce intervillage tensions and to build a spirit of unity. In all, CCF worked with 26 communities in hopes of reaching a relatively large number of children and helping to rebuild the torn social fabric in the North. These community dialogues, locally called "sensitization dialogues," emphasized that Sierra Leoneans are one people who had been together before the war and who were capable of becoming a united people again following the war. The resulting narrative of community unity helped lay the foundation for subsequent planning dialogues.

In the planning discussions, community members identified the main needs of children in the area, generated ideas for community projects to support the children, and then selected one community project as the highest priority for supporting young people. The communities selected diverse projects according to their context. Typical community projects involved rebuilding a school, building a health post, or repairing a bridge that improved access to markets, thereby boosting family income.

Following the communal planning of the projects, the next step was to implement them through cooperation on elements of design, site selection and preparation, materials procurement, and construction. In this process, CCF staff again played a facilitative role and also purchased the necessary local construction materials. However, it was the community members who were to build the structures. The strategy was to compose the work teams of formerly recruited youth, including youth from different sides if multiple groups were present, and village youth who

had not been part of the armed forces or groups. This cooperation aimed both to reduce the tensions between former soldiers and to build positive relations between formerly recruited youth and the village youth, many of whom had been attacked by soldiers during the war.

To prepare for the cooperative construction, CCF staff worked to build the empathy that hostile conflict demolishes (White 1984). In the absence of empathy, it is very difficult in post-conflict environments to build positive relations between neighbors and different subgroups in the community (Halpern and Weinstein 2004). To increase empathy with formerly recruited young people, whom most community members regarded as perpetrators who had attacked harmless civilians, but who themselves had not suffered, CCF staff emphasized that all children and young people had suffered. In fact, many young people had been abducted by the RUF and forced to commit horrible acts. Themes of collective suffering gained salience as different community members, including youth and children, told how they and their families had suffered during the war. This communalization of suffering not only stimulated empathy, but also built a sense of unity.

For the youth who comprised the work teams, CCF staff and elders conducted a two-day workshop that emphasized unity, how the war was past and how old stereotypes no longer applied, and the need to move together into a brighter future. Also, village elders and healers worked together with CCF staff to rekindle traditional proverbs, songs, and dances that built a spirit of reconciliation. They also established ground rules, such as no name-calling or use of language, gestures, or songs that would humiliate or anger others. Willingness to abide by these rules was a prerequisite for participation in the work teams.

Following the workshop, the work teams composed of village youth and formerly recruited children and youth built the designed projects. Each worker received for his 20 days of labor the local equivalent of \$27 USD, which was sufficient to purchase necessities such as food and clothing. As the building took place, youth received vocational counseling about which sources of livelihood they might want to pursue. Selected youth subsequently participated in a stream of vocational training and income generating activities supported by caring artisans who taught their skills and provided mentoring over the following year as the youth worked and repaid their loans.

Extensive interviews indicated that the project had positive effects in regard to intervillage unity and reconciliation. In focus group discussions, elders said that before the project, they had distrusted people from neighboring villages. By the end of the project, however, they said that relations had improved significantly, and they now enjoyed planning, working with, and visiting their neighbors in surrounding villages. Importantly, they also spoke of increased understanding of how the war had affected everyone and of the role of the villages in building peace. Some adults commented that before the project, they had not understood the linkages between what happened in their own village and the wider peace process. The project had illuminated the linkages.

Marked improvements were also visible concerning the relations among young people and also among young people and their communities. Formerly recruited children and youth who had fought on opposing sides said that through working



together on the construction projects, they learned that their former enemies were not demons, but were human beings who had suffered during the war and who had potential to be good citizens. Youth who had not been recruited also showed a reduction of enemy stereotypes and dehumanizing images, saying that as a result of the cooperative projects and the preparatory workshop, they saw the formerly recruited young people in a new light and were willing to live alongside them. Furthermore, community members said that having watched the young people build the structures and contribute actively to community improvement, they no longer feared the formerly recruited young people or regarded them as troublemakers. As one elder stated, “Before, we saw them as wild animals. Now we accept them—they are part of our community.”

These achievements contrasted starkly with the dire predictions many leaders and humanitarians made at the time the ceasefire was signed. With regard to formerly recruited young people, many had predicted “they can never go home,” implying that they would become a Lost Generation and a source of recurrent cycles of violence. In fact, some people, such as those regarded as having committed particularly horrendous atrocities, did not return to their villages. To this day, the streets of Freetown, the capital city, contain significant numbers of formerly recruited young people who chose not to return. This, however, was a small minority, as the overwhelming majority of formerly recruited young people did return and find a place in civilian life. This outcome testifies to the strong capacity people have for reconciliation at the grassroots level. That it is owing to a combination of Western and local methods points to the value of drawing on diverse cultural orientations and approaches in building cultures of peace.

## **Liberia: Forgiveness Festivals**

Liberia, Sierra Leone’s neighbor to the east, was devastated by two bloody internal wars between 1989 and 2003. Many of the fighters and other soldiers in the wars were young people, some of whom had been abducted and others who sought revenge for wrongdoings against them and their family members or saw life inside an armed group as their best option out of a set of bad options. Once in the armed groups, many young people were plied with drugs and given so-called traditional charms or rituals believed locally to make them bulletproof (Human Rights Watch 2004). Following the conflict, communities feared the young people, who, as had occurred in Sierra Leone, were regarded as dangerous troublemakers and as possible kindling for additional fighting.

The need for community reconciliation stemmed not only from the precarious situation of formerly recruited children and youth, but also from the profound disintegration of communities in Liberia. Over a decade of war and displacement, coupled with the desperate competition for resources, the pitting of different factions against each other, and a long history of privileging some local groups over others, produced a situation so low in social cohesion as to question the appropriateness of

the term ‘community’ (Richards et al. 2005). Under such circumstances, an essential component of community reconciliation is to forge or renew basic social bonds among people to rekindle the spirit of community as well as to reduce tensions between groups such as villagers and returning young people who had previously been in armed groups or forces.

To address this situation, CCF/Liberia worked through local leaders and other influential people to organize Forgiveness Festivals in numerous counties. The festivals, which typically ran for a full day, celebrated peace by means of song and dance; provided organized games that promoted teamwork and group cohesion; and offered community dramas that illustrated themes of peace and reconciliation. Often they included speeches in which formerly recruited young people—girls as well as boys—apologized publicly and asked the community to forgive them for what had happened during the war. Overall, however, the festivals were as much about improving relations and moving past the war as about forgiveness per se. In many cases, they were preceded by peace dialogues facilitated by CCF’s Liberian staff. Although the festivals were designed to be fun, they carried the serious message that it is time to put war behind and to move forward in peace.

In Bong County, where there had been longstanding conflict between the Galai and Powai communities of Panta Kpaai District, leaders and elders of each community participated in mediated dialogues about the war and the importance of building peace and unity. A subsequently convened Forgiveness Festival drew nearly 300 people, including elders, town chiefs, school principals, women’s groups, and youth. Many youth made peace-oriented statements on behalf of their community. Throughout the day, young people participated in football and kickball matches and in cultural performances. At the end of the day, young people conducted a community drama that featured themes of peace and reconciliation.

In interviews conducted with diverse people in this event, participants said that this event had improved relations and brought hope for peace between these two communities, which had not talked in the preceding 15 years. Also, the formerly recruited young people said they felt accepted, and this view resonated with those of adults in the communities. The festivals were followed by additional workshops on peace, which helped to continue the process of peacebuilding and intercommunal reconciliation. Those workshops, in turn, were followed by cooperative, community reconstruction projects such as those developed in Sierra Leone. Although the festivals were only a first step, they laid the foundation for the longer term process of peacebuilding.

## Conclusion

The brief interventions on reconciliation described here are best regarded as initial steps that need to be complemented with diverse activities and supports that engender long-term reconciliation. These wider community supports include the institutionalization of nonviolent means of handling conflict at all levels of community

life; the reduction of discrimination and oppression; the strengthening of systems for social, restorative and procedural justice; the reestablishment of law and order; the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure; the distribution of local power and resources in equitable ways that promote positive relationships; and the establishment of strong linkages with effective systems of governance, including at levels higher than the community level. This list, which could easily be extended, serves as a reminder of the limits of any single intervention.

By the same token, the interventions described above yield several valuable lessons. First, cultural practices are an essential part of community reconciliation and a useful complement to Western approaches. Cultural practices enable communities to construct meaningful narratives, whether expressed in songs, dances, stories, or dramas, about their circumstances and the value of peace. Following armed conflict, the rekindling of cultural practices such as cleansing rituals or the use of traditional songs helps to communalize pain and build continuity between a painful past, the difficult present, and the future. Through cultural practices, people express their collective identity and their hopes as well as their pain. By orienting the practices toward peacebuilding, the practices become avenues for restructuring collective identities and narratives in ways that promote unity, harmony, and peace.

Second, community reconciliation requires a systems approach. At the individual level, specific individuals such as formerly recruited young people need to be made acceptable to the community. Equally important are elements that address interpersonal, intergroup, and intercommunity aspects of reconciliation. In the postwar contexts discussed above, it is essential to rebuild basic social bonds between neighbors, improve intracommunity relations between formerly hostile subgroups, and build a wider sense of community that interconnects neighboring villages. As the case of Sierra Leone illustrated, these tasks can often be achieved through the use of methods that promote empathy and cooperation across the lines of conflict. Beyond these levels, it is crucial to establish effective linkages between communities and elements of the macrosystem, such as the provincial or district government, a functioning economy and political system, and inclusive structures of a central government that promotes social justice and avoids militarism. This systems approach, which connects the macrosystem of the society with the microsystem of communities, is valuable in constructing the civil society in which peace can take root.

The third lesson is that young people have a vital role to play in building peace. The case studies indicate that although young people often become warriors, they can also be agents of reconciliation. Even following very difficult life experiences, many young people exhibit resilience and defy images such as “damaged goods” or “scarred for life.” Given the proper supports, young people have the capacity to transition out of the bowels of the war system and develop means of supporting peacebuilding in their communities (Barber et al. 2006; Wessells 2006). Because young people are increasingly influential political actors, it is essential to bring them out of the margins of the post-conflict setting and to engage their prodigious energies as agents of peace. Helping young people to become agents of peace is one of the best means of breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and enabling the transformation of a culture of war into a culture of peace.

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