Reconciliation in Sierra Leone: Local Processes Yield Global Lessons

Elisabeth Hoffman

On a warm late-March evening, the sky still swirling with the afterclouds of an unexpected storm, two young Sierra Leonean men stood before a bonfire, surrounded by their families, elders, and neighbors from surrounding villages. Once the closest of friends, Sahr and Nyumah had been brutally torn apart by Sierra Leone's vicious civil war while still in their early teens—one boy forced by rebel soldiers to beat his friend and kill his friend's father.

The two came face to face that night, with each other and with their pasts. One man testified about his suffering; the other admitted his guilt and begged for forgiveness, which—in an astonishing act of grace—was freely given.

What may be more astonishing, however, is that Sahr and Nyumah are not alone. As part of a new groundbreaking national initiative, similar acts of truth-telling and reconciliation are taking place between victims and offenders in villages across Sierra Leone, igniting a person-to-person peace that has eluded the country since the war ended more than six years ago.

Sahr and Nyumah's experience—and the experiences of others like them—illustrates the ways in which thinking small may be the key

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to acting big. That is, focusing on the smallest possible units of analysis—the individual and the social unit closest to an individual's life, the village—may be the key to building a sustainable national peace in war-devastated areas in Africa.

Political and military leadership, whether of an official government or a rebel army group, certainly has the ability to wage widespread, destructive conflict or conversely to sign a treaty negotiating an end to such conflict. However, the impact of war, especially the brutal civil wars that have ravaged much of Africa in recent decades, has fallen most heavily on civilian populations. Witness the tens of thousands of Acholi living for more than a decade in camps for internally displaced persons in northern Uganda, their villages razed by rebel as well as government armies. Or witness across Sierra Leone the scarred shells of homes and businesses, roofless and still bloodstained or pockmarked with bullet holes, and a decimated road system and electrical infrastructure rendering local residents virtually disconnected from the rest of the world, even though the eleven-year civil war officially ended in 2002. Effective and sustainable rebuilding needs to focus most directly on meeting the needs of these civilian populations.

Translating that into reality in postwar reconstruction efforts tends to be difficult in practice, however. The top-level processes most visible in the international arena often put massive resources toward initiatives that impact very few people directly—witness the more than $300 million spent on the Special Court in Sierra Leone to try the nine men most responsible for fomenting the war there. When peace-building initiatives do focus more on directly reaching the individuals most affected by the war, they are often either short-term or are disconnected from the strategic processes or community infrastructure that would allow them to have deep and sustainable impact. This can be a result of limited funding (a chronic problem in peace-building), limited thinking (a lack of recognition that operating within a larger strategic framework is either necessary or possible), or limited will (a lack of willingness to put the time and effort needed to build the relational infrastructure that is critical for sustaining peace). Indigenous nongovernmental organizations bemoan the fact that international aid agencies ignore or demean their local resources and expertise or operate in ways that entrench dependency relationships rather than strengthening local capacity. Add to that differing cultural understandings of fundamental concepts such as justice, punishment, and reconciliation, and it would seem like a difficult, if not impossible, goal to have a sustained, effective peace-building partnership between Africa and Western states.

However, that goal is very much at the fore of the U.S.-based operating foundation Catalyst for Peace. In working to support locally rooted peace-building through active cross-cultural partnerships, we have learned lessons that we believe have broader significance. As a peace-building practitioner who in recent years also became a funder in the field, I have had the unique privilege—and challenge—of being able to ask the question: what work do I most want to do, and how do I most want to do it? I have shaped a funding approach that, rather than simply funding projects external to our operations, creates a collaborative platform that invites individuals and organizations to put forth the best of who and what they are in the service of the larger goals of an initiative. In identifying potential project partners, I consciously use a qualitative lens, valuing most the projects that are illumined by the qualities I hold of utmost importance in this work: authenticity, honesty and courage, humility, creativity, and generosity. Catalyst for Peace aims to have this lens shape not only the work itself, but also the way the work is done and the dynamics of the partnerships we forge to support that work.

The foundation's flagship project, Fambul Tok: Community Healing in Sierra Leone, illustrates well how this qualitative lens is manifest in an on-the-ground project. In partnership with the Sierra Leonean human rights NGO Forum of Conscience, Fambul Tok not only illuminates how effective Western-African partnerships might be built but also yields fresh insights related to the theory and practice of reconciliation.

FAMBUL TOK: BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

Six years after the end of Sierra Leone's brutal civil war, there is still a need for a secure, sustainable peace throughout the country. Since the war ended in 2002, an internationally-designed Truth and Reconciliation Commission has come and gone, while the United Nations–backed Special Court is about to wrap up its final deliberations in the prosecutions of the handful of men deemed most responsible for fomenting the conflict. Despite millions of dollars spent on these proceedings, neither body has succeeded in fundamentally changing the daily lives of Sierra Leoneans who still grapple with the aftermath of war.

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Fambul Tok—Krio for "family talk"—is a national initiative that addresses the need to foster a lasting peace from the village-level up. Begun as a three- to five-year program and building on traditional methods of reconciliation at the community level, Fambul Tok represents a way of drawing all members of Sierra Leone—whether victims, offenders, or witnesses— back into the Sierra Leonean family. The community healing processes are designed to prevent traumatic experiences from driving people into passiveness or renewed aggression; to encourage them to reflect on the past rather than withdraw; and to empower them to deal with past, present, and future conflicts.

Under the leadership of Program Director John Caulker, executive director of Forum of Conscience, Fambul Tok launched four months of consultations across all 14 districts of Sierra Leone in December 2007. The districts designated a broad cross section of representatives of affected populations (victims, ex-combatants, women, youth, religious leaders, elders, cultural leaders, local officials, etc.) to attend the consultations, which were geared toward assessing popular readiness for reconciliation, and if the population were ready, what they perceived to be the key components of genuine reconciliation. Finally, the representatives considered what resources they already had within their communities for initiating and sustaining that process.

Though the populations had never before had a forum for coming to terms with the past, the overwhelming response, in every district, was *yes*—they were ready to reconcile. Community representatives acknowledged the unhealed wounds of war, as well as the difficult realities of having perpetrators and victims living side by side. It was also clear from the consultation process that communities had local cultural traditions and practices of reconciliation, dormant since the war, which they were eager to reawaken for the purposes of social healing. The predominant characteristic of these traditions and practices was an orientation toward reintegrating perpetrators into the community, instead of alienating them through punishment or retribution. The cultural imperative of truth-telling and forgiveness aims to address the wounds of the past in a way that makes communities whole again.

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Based on the learning from the consultations, Fambul Tok launched the pilot phase of its implementation in Kailahun district, in the easternmost part of the country on the border of Liberia and Guinea-Conakry. Kailahun is the place where the war began and ended, and it is one of the districts most devastated by the war. As community members articulated the need for processes within much smaller geographic locales, to specifically meet the needs of the communities for forgiveness and reconciliation, initial plans to implement the program at the chiefdom level—of which there are 14 in Kailahun district—were quickly dropped in favor of even more localized, village-level efforts. Fambul Tok staff therefore adapted their original plans and have been working at micro levels, where small groups of villages have joined together to appoint their own Fambul Tok committees. Comprised of representatives of all the stakeholder groups, these committees are designing their own programs, facilitated by the Fambul Tok national staff.

Each cluster of villages will carry out the program in its own way, although the general structure will be similar across settings: a community truth-telling bonfire is held in the evening, at which victims and offenders have the opportunity to come forward and to tell their stories to their communities. They can ask for forgiveness or offer forgiveness when ready. This is followed the next day by a cleansing ceremony, drawing upon distinctive local traditions of healing. Based upon the lessons learned in the pilot phase in Kailahun, which draws to a close in summer 2008, the goal is to roll out the program nationwide by the end of 2009, with Fambul Tok ceremonies by then underway in each district. It may take three to five years for every village in the country to be involved in some way with such a ceremony.

As simple an idea as it is at one level for villages to host a bonfire and a ceremony drawing from their own local culture and traditions, the realities of putting it in place are complex. Simply traveling to some places in Kailahun—ten-hour drives or more from the capital Freetown on routes that could hardly be considered roads and in some cases are in fact only foot paths—is a difficult process. Sensitizing the communities to the concept, forging the relationships necessary to effectively conduct the conversation, facilitating the design process, and tilling the soil such that it will enable communities to experience the process of reconciliation as much more than a one-time event—these are complicated, difficult, and time-consuming processes.

And yet, the powerful simplicity of the process reasserts itself quite vividly throughout each ceremony. In the end, it comes down to people—

individual people, the transformation of their individual hearts, the release of their hidden burdens. These individual stories are linked to the reassertion of the traditional communal ties and values that were fractured by the war.

IT COMES DOWN TO INDIVIDUALS

Sahr and Nyumah, the young men mentioned at the beginning of this piece, stood to testify before the village bonfire in Gbekedu as a part of one of the first community ceremonies in the Fambul Tok process.

Boyhood friends, the two were barely teenagers when the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded their villages, which are located near the Liberian border. Sahr and his father fled into the bush, only to be captured by RUF soldiers. At the bonfire that night, Sahr spoke of how the rebels ordered him to kill his father and of his repeated refusal. His close friend, Nyumah, had also been taken by the rebels and was there in the bush, Sahr testified. The rebels ordered Nyumah to beat his friend, under threat of death, for defying their orders to kill his father. Nyumah complied, beating his friend so severely that even today Sahr's body remains misshapen, and he is able to walk only with great difficulty, supported by a cane.

Living since the end of the war in villages just a mile or so apart, the former friends had not spoken about these events until this evening. Acknowledging what he had done, bowing in a deep gesture of deference and apology, Nyumah asked his friend for forgiveness—which Sahr immediately gave. As was the case with each pair of testifiers that evening, villagers broke into song as the young men embraced and danced around the bonfire.

The poignancy of Sahr and Nyumah's story reached new depths in a follow-up interview the next day with documentary filmmaker Sara Terry. Terry describes gently broaching the subject of Sahr's father and what had happened to him that day in the bush. Seeing the misery etched on Nyumah's face, she asked the difficult question lingering in everyone's thoughts: had Nyumah killed his friend's father? Terry describes the response this way:

> . . . the young man said, very softly, yes. I was watching his friend [Sahr]; he didn't flinch at the news, didn't move away from his friend. I continued talking to the young man who'd done the killing, guiding the questions away from the killing to other things, I can't even remember what right now. I knew I just didn't want to turn immediately to Sahr and ask him how he felt. But in a few minutes, I did

that, I turned to him and asked how he felt now, with all the things that he had heard. He was very direct and simple in his reply: "I forgive him everything."

The other young man, his friend [Nyuma], swooped into a bow at his friend's feet. . . .

. . . I learned later from my translator that Sahr had said to his friend, "I want this forgiveness to last forever and ever." And then they started to shake hands and then the handshake turned into an embrace. The two said goodbye to us, and started walking up the path back into the village—one in front of the other, the guy who was beaten struggling a bit as he walked behind. Then his friend turned and they put their arms around each other and walked back into the village.[1]

There is an undisputed innocence to this story. It is the innocence of a broken relationship restored and that relationship's ultimate contribution to the restoration of a broken community. In its innocence the story also restores our faith in the essential goodness of people and in their ability to make amends, even after egregious wrongs.

One of the primary concepts of change guiding the design and implementation of Fambul Tok is the belief that each person has the power, the goodness, and the capacity to contribute to society in helpful and healthy ways. When people experience violence and hurt, those innate capacities can be suppressed, and in their assumed absence, individuals act in ways contrary to their nature. Fambul Tok's work throughout Sierra Leone is geared toward transforming the identity of victim and offender created through war and toward reconnecting both with their inherent goodness. Each ceremony and process is carried out in a distinctive way, but each will have the same ingredients: truth-telling, individuals taking responsibility and apologizing for offenses committed, forgiveness from victims, and collective activities aimed at drawing participants together into a reassertion of their communal values and their collective humanity. This healing is necessary in order for individuals to contribute to sustainable peace and development.

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THE "CONTAINER" FOR RECONCILIATION

Any initiative that focuses on the importance of the individual runs the risk of creating isolated experiences of illumination or transformation—valuable on their own terms, certainly, but not connected to any larger civic processes or goals nor replicable in the broader population. The story of Sahr and Nyumah does not exist in isolation, however, nor is it random or emerging by happenstance. They were but one of several pairs of victims and perpetrators that came forward to confess and to ask for and offer forgiveness before their community that evening. The confessions around the bonfire in Gbekedu took place at one of dozens of bonfire ceremonies throughout Kailahun district in spring and summer 2008, in preparation for rolling out the program nationwide the next fall. The fact that the "container" for their experience—the social space in which it takes place—is a national process, something bigger than just their own experience, is part of what makes it safe for them to come forward in the way that they did, as well as part of what establishes a communal, even national, significance to their story.

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Recognizing the incompleteness of earlier justice and reconciliation processes in Sierra Leone, the stated goal of Fambul Tok is to create a forum for *everyone* to engage in the process, wherever they are. There is an underlying valuing of ordinary citizenry in this concept, a conviction that everyone has something to contribute to the nation and its healing, and that allowing anyone to be incapacitated by untended wounds of war is to waste the most precious of national resources.

This "container" is also playing a particularly important role in encouraging ex-combatants, a group that has been difficult to engage in the past due in large part to fear of prosecution associated with the Special Court process, to come forward and testify. Caulker reports that in areas that were strongholds for Kamarjor militia, about 90 percent of testifiers at recent ceremonies were ex-combatants who came forward to admit to the killing and harm they had done and to ask their communities

for forgiveness.[2] The combination of a national program context with a completely localized manifestation has yielded broad-based engagement.

PEACE-BUILDING IS LOCALLY ROOTED AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC

Structurally, a process that relies on centralized control and hierarchical lines of authority in order to facilitate such broad-based participation would be practically impossible to imagine—nor would it be sustainable at a local level. Creating a structure of local ownership of the process has allowed for rapid dissemination of the ideas and processes, while also bringing individuals into much more direct reflection on their own experiences and toward the stated goal of acknowledging and accepting what went wrong in their community—and, by extension, their country—and seeing that they are free now to start anew. The eagerness of communities to engage in the reconciliation process has been beyond what any planning projections predicted.

The challenge of local ownership is that it is dependent on the quality of the individuals selected by the community for leadership roles; experience is indeed showing that some are more actively engaged than others. But the pride of engagement and the obvious impact of the restoration of dignity, derived simply from being invited into this kind of opportunity, were quite palpable throughout Kailahun during my travels there in March 2008. It is difficult to comprehend the degree to which towns were talking about the program as theirs—not belonging to Forum of Conscience and certainly not Catalyst for Peace, but *theirs*—and all in less than four months' time from the official launch of the project. This was the single most noted aspect of the program among all the chiefs, elders, team members, and villagers we met. They consistently spoke of this being the first time that they were consulted on the kind of reconciliation *they* wanted and needed, and the first time they were actively encouraged to identify and draw upon their local traditions and resources to engage in this kind of process.

As a result of the local ownership and design, no two ceremonies have been or will be alike. Our working assumption is that locally contextualized initiatives will have the greatest impact and will also be the most sustainable. Peace-building is culturally specific, and this is true not only in a national or even regional sense but also in a local sense. Different communities have different traditions, different practices, and different sensibilities. Recognizing this—honoring and building upon local approaches—allows the work to flourish and expand.[3]

For instance, at the reconciliation ceremony in Bormaru, the town where the first shots of the war were fired and also where the first official Fambul Tok ceremony took place (in fact, on the anniversary of the start of the war on March 23, 1991), villagers walked through a path in the woods to an ancient rock that was sacred to them. The rock had long been a place where villagers would gather to communicate with their ancestors and to ask their blessing on whatever challenges they might be facing. It had not, however, been used since the war and had been completely overgrown with bush as a result. Adults from the community spoke of never having been to visit the rock before, though they had grown up there. Elsewhere, in Kpaingbankordu, outside of Koindu, a structure in the middle of the village is referred to as the "little house," the place where the spirits of their ancestors live and which also served as the place where the community gathered when it needed to solve a problem. It, too, had not been used in this way since the war. These traditions and practices speak to the cultural and relational infrastructure that was fractured along with the destruction of physical infrastructure during the war—infrastructure that Fambul Tok is helping revive.

NETWORKED SHARING OF LEARNING

Sharing experiences, which is a key component of the Fambul Tok process, generates wisdom that can become part of collective awareness about lessons learned, about challenges, and about positive outcomes. This is manifest in both the internal and external dimensions of the project. As the pilot ceremonies unfolded in Kailahun, it became clear that there was a need to create a framework for continuing the dialogue within communities. In response and in consultation with local committees, Fambul Tok staff decided that after villages participate in the reconciliation ceremonies, a "peace tree" would be designated to serve as an ongoing meeting place to resolve community conflicts through Fambul Tok. In addition, youth are being mobilized to record community members' stories to share on local radio networks.

In addition to creating these resources for Sierra Leone, the lessons learned and the examples of reconciliation are being shared outside the country through print and film documentation. A key element of the program design is a documentary film of the project as it unfolds. The film will serve multiple purposes: primarily to tell the story of this kind of reconciliation to audiences of very different experiences but also to serve a national purpose in sharing learning from the early phases of the project more

widely, in helping to create and to strengthen communication networks nationally, and in directly furthering the goals of the project.

This commitment to communication has cultivated astute skills of observation among the staff, skills that directly support the program's ability to respond constructively in a dynamic process.

EMERGENT DESIGN

A common challenge in peace-building work is the lack of ability to be responsive and adaptive to changing and evolving realities on the ground, in part because of the rigidity of funding structures. A rigidity of structure is particularly incompatible with elicitive approaches, such as those embodied by Fambul Tok, given its commitment to allow maximum local ownership and culturally sensitive design of the reconciliation processes. With a consultative approach, there is a degree to which one simply cannot know in advance how the process will be structured.

In an attempt to address that challenge, Catalyst for Peace is working with the concept of "emergent design," meaning that there are core elements, objectives, and operating principles in place, but that the program must be responsive to on-the-ground realities and therefore must have a measure of flexibility in its structure and implementation. Doing this successfully, however, requires new sets of skills and new ways of working. It calls for transparency of operations, which in turn requires trust and open communication. It requires vigorous observation and ongoing, astute assessment. It requires exercising peripheral vision, a concept that John Paul Lederach describes eloquently in his recent work on *The Moral Imagination*.[4]

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Moreover, it is difficult to structure responsiveness to on-the-ground realities, the seizing of opportunities, and changing course as needed when working within a short-term framework. Part of Catalyst for Peace's strategy, as exemplified by Fambul Tok, is to support long-term processes rather than simply projects or single events. The hybrid funder/practitioner role enables Catalyst for Peace to think in terms of providing a platform for peace-building, rather than simply funding—or simply running—a program. This multifaceted Catalyst for Peace platform includes, as needed,

support in design and evaluation, capacity building to achieve objectives, networking, and provision of financial resources.

THE ROLE OF "THE WEST"

Many organizations working in war-torn countries offer programming predicated on the notion that answers need to be brought *to* people. The perspective of Catalyst for Peace from the beginning of our work in Sierra Leone has been that the answers for building sustainable peace were to be found *in* Sierra Leone—and so it has proved to be. Fambul Tok is a Sierra Leone–generated program, conceived by Caulker, who had tried unsuccessfully over a number of years to find partners to fund and help implement the program.

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Organizationally, Catalyst for Peace approaches the partnership with a learning orientation. As an outside organization working in Sierra Leone, we do not come with a preconceived program for a local entity to implement on our behalf. Rather, we are driven by the question: how can sustainable reconciliation best happen in postwar Sierra Leone? With that question as a guide, we can play a role in helping convene relevant parties, helping facilitate program development, and pulling in outside expertise as necessary. (For example, we brought in training expertise from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding of Eastern Mennonite University to help train the local Fambul Tok committees in trauma healing and community mediation skills.) We also support the building of coalitions and help communicate the story of the work. This parallels the role that the national Fambul Tok staff plays relative to the local committees.

There is a kind of organizational humility required to operate in this way, a principle that we strive to have characterize all of our work. We believe there is an integrity in this approach, however, that is necessary to the integrity of the program itself. If we want to facilitate the kind of initiatives that entail significant learning and individual transformation, we have to demonstrate that same willingness to learn and grow ourselves. As that happens, we authentically magnify the impact of these initiatives even further.

Rooted in the most localized context, yet with all the resources and connectedness of a global learning community; within a framework that puts a premium on the integrity of individual experience, yet calls forth all the transformational potential of the collective—these are some of the keys to the Fambul Tok program and to Catalyst for Peace's work more generally. Willingness to start small—micro-philanthropy, as it were—yet to think and to work strategically from an institutionalized dynamic learning model is yielding remarkable fruit. In a world now guided by the activist credo "Think globally, act locally," we are entering an era where the reverse of that sentiment may well be in order. "Thinking locally" could turn out to be as important for effecting global transformation, particularly in the arena of building durable peace. ∎

ENDNOTES

1   Sara Terry, in an email to the author, March 29, 2008.
2   From field report to Catalyst for Peace, May 20, 2008.
3   For an excellent summary of the principles of effective peace-building, see Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, *Women and Peacebuilding: Essays on Human Rights and Democratic Development* (Montreal: International Centre on Human Rights and Democratic Development, 1999), vii.
4   John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118-122.