



Angolan IDPs resolving conflicts

by Steve Utterwulghe

On the rare occasions that Angola makes the international headlines it is usually to inform the world what a terrible place it is.

Statistics on mine fatalities or infant and maternal mortality dominate opening paragraphs. This is all for the good. The world should indeed know what has been going on in Angola for the last 30 years. However, it is possible amid the gloom to find encouragement.

There are up to four million IDPs in Angola. While most live in camps, others have fled to Luanda and provincial capitals. Living conditions are hard: limited access to water, no electricity, few schools for children, ill-equipped or non-existent health posts, promiscuity, insecurity and violence. Many displaced people depend on humanitarian aid to survive.

IDPs face a plethora of additional problems that few organisations consider as priorities. They have left their homes because they are victims of the

long-lasting war between governmental and UNITA forces. Most have had to flee to avoid being robbed, harassed, abducted or killed. Every displaced person carries a burden of traumatic experience. Many have lost everything, witnessed massacres, lost track of parents and children (sometimes permanently) and ended up far from home. Some have been living in camps for many years and may have been displaced up to five times.

It is hardly surprising that violence is ubiquitous in crowded camps in which traumatised and uprooted people are forced to compete for scarce resources. Conflicts arise between people from different provinces, between young and old, members of different churches, displaced and resident populations, IDPs and the military, IDPs from different camps and between people within camps.

Disputes sometimes centre on the distribution of humanitarian aid. Some fights are fuelled by alcohol.

Empowerment and conflict resolution

Should not humanitarian institutions be as involved in trying to deal with the conflicts and violence faced by IDPs as they are in delivering basic humanitarian assistance? If one does not address violence affecting IDPs, any solution reached at a higher polit-

IDPs must feel empowered

ical level will be unsustainable. Displaced people are an integral part of civil society and should be included in all peace and reconciliation processes. Hopefully, one day IDPs will be able to return home. When they do, land, property and ethnic-related conflicts will confront them. Engaging IDPs in conflict resolution activities stimulates reflection and provides skills to reduce tension, avoid violence and resolve conflicts. Today's conflict resolution is tomorrow's conflict prevention.

While humanitarian intervention is often necessary it must not create a culture of dependency. Humanitarian actors and international donors should acknowledge the need to invest proactively in long-term sustainability. IDPs must feel empowered. The feeling of being assisted, victimised and, in the end, frustrated only generates depression, lethargy and a sense of abandonment. 'Beneficiaries' and 'victims' need to become 'partners'.

Communities have always had the creative means to reduce daily tension and violence.

The Centre for Common Ground (CCG) has been working in support of national reconciliation in Angola since 1996. CCG has adopted a multifaceted approach in its work with Angola's displaced population. IDPs are being equipped with the skills and means to act as civil society actors; by building the capacity of the displaced population, leaders and potential leaders are able to organise themselves in order to constructively present their concerns to the authorities.

CCG and IDPs have established councils in the many camps of Luanda and Bengo Provinces. Each *nucleo* is composed of around 15 IDPs and has a coordinator who is him/herself displaced. The overall objective of the *nucleo* is to establish a recognised group of men and women able to play a positive role in daily camp life. They not only serve as the link between CCG and the camp leaders chosen by the government or between CCG and the individuals of the camp but also play a decisive role in trying to resolve conflicts, working effectively with adversaries and local authorities.

Communities have always had the creative means to reduce daily tension and violence. These strategies must be encouraged and developed. In many cases, however, these conflict-solving mechanisms have been overlooked, as war-related trauma and damage have forced individuals and households to focus on their own immediate interests. Training sessions in conflict resolution are aimed at encouraging displaced people to use conflict resolution mechanisms, traditional and modern, to reduce tension, avoid violence and resolve conflict in a non-violent way. Basic skills training

is provided as well as training for trainers. The ultimate goal is to have a strong *nucleo* with members acting as mediators in the community.

Paulo Freire taught us that "dialogue is the encounter of men in order to transform the world". Bringing people together around a specific topic with a productive facilitation process aiming to build consensus can provide transformative energy to participants. Dialogue is not only a trauma-healing technique for some individuals but is also the archetype of the notion of praxis. Reflection is only the appetiser for a hungry intellect. Praxis, or reflection with appropriate action resulting from active dialogue, is the substantial food that will give force to the body of an eventual common understanding and problem-solving process.

The role of theatre and the media

CCG has trained two local theatre troupes in conflict resolution and interactive theatre. IDP actors play stories told by participants. The telling of a story creates empathy and releases the heavy burden and pain related to a traumatic past. Conflict resolution theatre creates empathy between displaced people from different camps, different populations within camps and between IDPs and local residents. CCG plans to use interactive theatre with former child soldiers and war-affected youth in order to share experiences of war and dissuade those who might be lured by the prospect of taking up arms.

In Angola, and in other countries where it works, CCG uses the media to disseminate messages about alternatives to conflict. The power of peace-building media is immense. TV documentaries, conflict resolution soap operas and radio programmes can transform attitudes. Recognising that in Angola IDPs seldom have an opportunity to use their voice outside their community, CCG has initiated a project that allows IDPs to be heard on radio. Call-in shows include guests from diverse social sectors. To enable the participation of camp residents, CCG distributes wind-up radios.

Rights and concerns

Conflict resolution must be linked with promoting knowledge of, and respect for, human rights. Displaced people generally lack the confidence or the initiative to claim their rights. Thus CCG is working with UNHCR to disseminate the Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons in IDP camps. However, simply to teach people their rights without building a capacity to talk about, defend and present those rights in a non-adversarial way is like giving a fisherman a net with gaping holes. Rights have to be respected; if they are not, individuals must be able to demand respect of their rights in an appropriate way, ie non-violent and strategic.

The project has been successful. IDPs from a camp requested that CCG facilitate a workshop involving civil servants, police, church representatives, IDP camp coordinators chosen by the government and IDP coordinators from CCG nuclei. IDPs reported that for the first time they could really talk to officials about their rights and deplorable living conditions in a non-adversarial and constructive way. To maintain the momentum generated by the gathering, participants agreed to meet on a monthly basis to continue talking about issues of concern. In the words of a displaced person from a camp in Bengo Province: "CCG gives us more food than the humanitarian organisations. You feed us with skills that will help us throughout our lives."

Investing in the future

In addition to the delivery of essential humanitarian aid, the international community must be creative in its efforts to find a peaceful solution to the years of conflict in Angola. We must invest in the Angolan people, many of whom are displaced, and build on their capacity to transform the prevailing culture of war into a culture of peace.

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The Search for Common Ground website is www.sfcg.org.