The Pearson Global Forum
Part III. Consequences of a Breakdown in Social Order
Can the Wounds of War be Healed? Reconciling After Civil Conflict by Oeindrila Dube, Philip K. Pearson
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NICKI NABASNY: Hello everyone, welcome back. I hope you enjoyed the morning sessions and your conversations at lunch, and now we are ready to dive into the afternoon sessions. I wanna make a quick note that inside your program book you'll find a survey that allows you to give feedback on all the sessions today. Please do take a minute to fill that out, and you can hand it to anyone wearing a staff badge, or drop it at the registration table on your way out. We'd love to get your feedback on the day.

Now, without further ado we'll jump right back in, thanks.

OEINDRILA DUBE: [Mari 04:02:32] heard that the rebels were coming. It was a rainy day in May 2001 in the middle of the civil war in Sierra Leone. Her thoughts immediately went to her mother and her daughter, and she scrambled to get back to her village. But when she got there she saw the flames and she knew it was too late. The rebels had set fire to her house. When Mari realized this her body gave way, she basically collapsed. Her fellow villagers essentially supported her, held her, and they also put their hands over her mouth so she wouldn't scream out loud. After all, if she screamed the rebels would discover where they were hiding, too.

From that position Mari watched as her house burned to the ground with both her mother and her daughter inside. Now, Mari survived that night, but later she would learn that [Phatoo 04:03:43], another woman in the village, had given away the location of where people were hiding. If it hadn't been for Phatoo, Mari's mother and her daughter would not have died that night.

When I met Mari ten years later she told me that she and Phatoo still lived in the same village. Now it's not a very large village. It only takes four or five minutes to cross from one side to the other. Despite this, every day when Mari wakes up in the morning she plans her day to make sure that she does not run into Phatoo, and Phatoo, likewise, does the same. To this day Mari and Phatoo are locked in a dance of avoidance around each other.

Now, their story actually highlights one of the central challenges facing every country coming out of conflict. Conflicts leave behind hostility, grudges, animus, and every post-conflict society needs to find some way of helping people overcome this, of restoring broken social ties, of renewing-

...boring, broken social ties. A renewing social capital in their communities. The question is how. Now, some people say the key to this is having people explicitly address and air their wartime grievances

through truth and reconciliation processes. What's a truth and reconciliation process? Well, here's one that took place in Sierra Leone. People have come together, they're talking about the past, they're talking about the things that happened to them during the war. Victims will describe the atrocities they experienced, perpetrators will admit to crimes and seek forgiveness for these crimes. Now, they're not prosecuted or punished for admitting to these crimes and victims are not financially compensated for participating in this process and the process itself can last just a day or two long. So the question is, can something like this work to restore social capital in contexts like Sierra Leone's, which had such a long and brutal civil war?

Now, proponents of reconciliation processes are very eager to say yes. They claim, absolutely, it can renew societal healing and it can promote social capital. They even go on to make a second claim, that it can be psychologically beneficial, that it can promote psychological healing. But when we started looking into this question, which is shortly after I met [Ry 04:06:27], we found that there really wasn't very much evidence around these points at all. And as this quote here suggests, these claims typically had rested more on faith than on actual empirical evidence. So we set out to fill this gap by conducting a field experiment, a social experiment, on reconciliation in Sierra Leone.

Now, the reconciliation ceremonies that we evaluated were being conducted by an organization called [Fembletalk 04:06:54], which means "family talk" in [Creo 04:06:58]. This organization was created by a Sierra Leonian, named John Cocker, who, when he looked around him, and saw many examples, like [Marai and Fatu 04:07:08], was deeply convinced that they need for reconciliation remained in place, even years after the war had ended. Their idea was to have community level reconciliation in sections of 10 villages. And in these sections, they held reconciliation ceremonies that brought victims face to face with perpetrators in which perpetrators would admit to and seek forgiveness for their crimes.

Now, at the time that we met John Cocker and his organization, they were already working in six districts of Sierra Leone, but they were poised to expand into new sections, so we worked with them, by design, to randomize the new places in which they would be working so we could evaluate the effects of reconciliation and assess these dual claims that are made about psychological and societal healing.

Now, there's an important point to note about timeline here. The war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002. The reconciliation processes that we're looking at took place 10 years later, in 2011-2012. And we evaluated their effects and saw what their effects were a year or two, even further, down the road.

What were the areas that were part of the study? Well, we worked in 100 sections and 50 of them were assigned into the reconciliation treatment and another 50 served as a comparable control. All told, we surveyed nearly 2,400 people who were the participants in our study.

Using this approach, the first question we wanted to understand was, does reconciliation actually lead to greater forgiveness of war perpetrators? So we asked respondents 12 questions that were designed

to gauge their feelings of effect and resentment and anger toward perpetrators. Using this approach, we found that, in fact, people that resided in the places that had gone through reconciliation were substantially more likely to have forgiven their war perpetrators. So forgiveness increased.

We then wanted to go on to understand, does reconciliation lead to greater social capital in the communities? So we looked at social networks and we found that, in fact, social networks were stronger in the places that had gone through reconciliation. People had more friendship ties, people reported relying more on each other for help and advice. We also saw that participation in community groups increased. People were much more likely to be part of organizations, like religious organizations, like PTAs, like women's groups.

We also wanted to look at contributions to public goods. And this is really important because, in a very poor village in Sierra Leone, if you want to do something, like repair a primary school, you can't rely on a lot of resources coming down from the central government. You have to mobilize resources locally and what we found was, places that had gone through reconciliation, people were much more likely to contribute, either labor or money toward doing things like building health clinics and building schools, toward repairing roads and toward contributing to families in need. All of this suggested that social capital had, in fact, increased in these places. And it makes sense if we think about the story of [Marai and Fatu 04:10:40]. If you're able to forgive people for crimes that were committed, it makes sense that it might incline you more to be able to participate jointly in activities and you may feel better about contributing to your community.

But remember, we also wanted to assess the second effect, on what happens to psychological well-being in these places. To do that, we looked at three key measures of psychological well-being: depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder. And here, we found a very different picture. We found the places that had gone through reconciliation fared worse on all three dimensions. So, what's our interpretation of this? Our interpretation is that confronting the past can be incredibly distressing. Victims have to relive these terrible memories. Perpetrators might feel great shame in admitting to crimes. Third parties yet might be learning about new atrocities that took place in their village that they were not even aware of before. And reconciliation processes, in their current incarnation, are not designed to help people cope with these memories.

And by the way, these effects were not fleeting. We were able to look at the effects up to two and a half years after the reconciliation ceremonies took place and we found all of the effects, the negative effects on psychological well-being as well as the positive effects on social capital and forgiveness persisted into the long run.

So, stepping back, we think these results tell us something about animus left behind. First and foremost, we think these results tell us that people do not self heal, that animus doesn't simply disappear with the passage of time. We looked at reconciliation processes that took place 10 years after the war had

ended. They couldn't have had the effects that they did on forgiveness, on restoring social ties, if people had been able to let go of their hatreds. Think back to the story of [Marai and Fatu 04:13:10]. To this day, [Marai 04:13:13] sees the death of her family in the eyes of [Fatu 04:13:16] and in the absence of explicit efforts and interventions to help people let go of these hostilities and these grudges, these grudges can be long lasting. So we need to invest in ways to help people let go.

Now, reconciliation processes seem to get us part of the way there. They seem to improve forgiveness, they seem to improve social capital, but of course they also have these psychological effects. So we think that these processes should be designed and redesigned so as to retain their societal benefits without imposing these psychological costs. For example, by having more ongoing engagement with participants, to help people prepare their minds for what they will encounter and to help them better cope with the negative war memories that are raised.

We certainly think this is worth investing in, this design and this redesign because what we know about conflicts is that sometimes, they go away, but sometimes, they flare back up after periods of peace, and understanding where hostility is left behind can help us to understand these cycles of violence. This is certainly important to do as we consider the large number of countries that have been embroiled in conflict during recent years. Because when these conflicts come to an end, we will have to grapple with the question of whether these are places where people have been able to let go of their hatreds and their hostilities or whether these are places where violence will continue to cycle over and over and over again. Thank you.