

# Inter-community meetings and national reconciliation:

forging a pragmatic peace

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**B**y late 1994, local civil society leaders in northern Mali had reached a common understanding that if they did not take responsibility for their own affairs, they would continue to be exploited by politicians, administrators and the armed movements. Faced with these dilemmas, traditional leaders began to initiate peace talks in their communities. The process began with a few meetings that convened influential figures from the community and the movements. The success of these meetings led to a gradual systemization and expansion of the peacemaking process. It grew organically because those who had been living with the violence took ownership and were aided with some of the strategic and financial resources needed to do so effectively. The cumulative outcome of dozens of meetings involving thousands of people throughout the north was stability, the foundations for national reconciliation and a greater sense of empowerment for local self-governance.

## Meetings to end the violence

The village chief of Bourem initiated the first inter-community meeting in November 1994. Nomad chiefs from across the area gathered and agreed to contribute to peace by motivating the people under their influence. These traditional leaders succeeded in bringing their constituencies along with them. This initiative sparked a number of similar meetings based on activating traditional conflict resolution methods. A second Bourem meeting was held on 11 January 1995 and resulted in a local truce to end the fighting. Other meetings were held in January in Gao, in March in Menaka and in April in Ansongo. These meetings involved representatives of the Ganda Koy and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Azaouad, headed by Zeïdan Ag Sidalamine. The Ansongo meeting also included the Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of Azaouad. A final meeting in this series took place in Aglal, just across the river from Timbuktu, which ended fighting in Timbuktu Province.

The main result of these initial meetings was to create localized ceasefires between the movements, ending the organized violence by late April 1995. Civil society had managed to put an end to the insurgency and succeeded where the army, the movement leaders and the government had all failed. Yet combatants and civilians remained heavily armed – with some turning to banditry as their livelihood – and social and economic life was dysfunctional. Fear was widespread and approximately 150,000 refugees remained abroad. Clearly many issues had to be addressed to develop a lasting peace.

The government was, however, pleased with the process and attempted to maintain the momentum. From 13-25 May 1995, several governmental commissions, each headed by a minister, travelled through northern Mali. Their objective was to listen to the people and appraise

remaining tensions. The commissioners were impressed that local communities seemed ready to take the initiative. They encouraged civil society to continue efforts by organizing a reconciliation process to help economic and social life to resume and thus create conditions that would facilitate the demobilization and disarmament of the combatants. Although well-intentioned, the members of the governmental commissions did not understand the difficulties in initiating local action after a century of authoritarian government that had severely repressed all initiatives of this kind. Local communities needed guidance from people they trusted and a strategy they could adapt to direct their action. Consequently the governmental commissions achieved no immediate results.

Nevertheless, efforts continued. In early September 1995, a meeting was held in Mbouna – a historically significant location for peacemaking – involving communities west of the Niger River. There were more than 2,500 participants, including 85 who represented Malian refugees in Mauritania. It was the first meeting where reconciliation between the communities was the main topic. It was organized with German support by a group of key persons in civil society in the north and a representative of the Commissariat for the North. The meeting marked a turning point in relations across the north and deepened the consensus on ending the war. Yet it was not an ideal setting for a generalized process of reconciliation: it was too expensive, too big, and too difficult to chair and some felt it did not have the right leadership. The lesson many drew was that a generalized process needed to rely on a local leadership.

## Facilitation group

Despite bringing violence to a halt, local communities were unable to proceed to the next phase. Up until this point the meetings had been self-initiated – though they had received some financing from the government and NGOs – and community leaders had not felt the need for a more systematic strategy. But the time was ripe for external guidance in order to proceed from an objective of stopping the violence to a more creative goal. A small group of experienced civil society leaders formed a facilitation group to provide guidance for locally-led initiatives. They elaborated a strategy for managing the current situation based on an analysis of the recent experiences of adapting traditional skills for peacemaking. The facilitation group emerged out of a partnership between local actors and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA).

The NCA had been involved in northern Mali since 1984, when it started a relief project in Gourma as a result of a call for help from the Malian government. They soon became the biggest external agency in the north. In

1987-88, the operation became an integrated rural development project and over time NCA developed strong relations with people who were to take top positions on all sides of the conflict. Two senior staff members, Zahabi Ould Sidi Mohamed (FIAA) and Zeïdan Ag Sidalamine (FPLA) became general secretaries of their movements. Another senior staff member, Mohamed Ag Erlaf (a member of the MPA), became minister in the transitional government 1991 and remained in various ministries until 1999. Whereas all other international NGOs discontinued their activities for long periods of time during the war, the NCA remained and carried out activities based on the policy "as much as possible, where it is possible, whenever it is possible." This policy had a heavy cost and seven Malian staff members were killed. Yet NCA's operations were highly valued and it was generally trusted by all parties.

In April 1994, Zeïdan Ag Sidalamine called his former NCA colleague, Kâre Lode, to ask for assistance: "We are in a promising process towards peace, of which we should not lose control. I want you to be 'the oil in the works'." They needed a respected outsider to add credibility and money from a reliable NGO to support the process and turned to Lode because of their own history of personal relations and trust. When approached by Zeïdan, Lode could immediately give a positive answer knowing that NCA would take care of the budget and his current employers in the Norwegian Missionary Society would accept any involvement in the peace process.

The first step was to form a facilitation group consisting of Lode, Zeïdan, UNDP Consultant Ibrahim Ag Youssouf, and two people who had served in the Commissariat of the North, Abacar Sidibe and Aghatam Ag Alhassane. The four Malians in the group were men who were respected for their integrity. Each had practical experience with the earlier inter-community meetings and these experiences became the basis of the facilitation group's peace process strategy, with Ibrahim and Zeïdan as the main contributors. Kâre Lode met with the newly appointed Commissioner for the North, Mohamadou Diagouraga, who was both open to innovation and supportive of civil society initiatives. After discussing the plan with him for approximately half an hour, Diagouraga gave Lode a free hand to proceed with the programme, on the sole condition that he was kept informed of the progress. His support was invaluable and on several occasions he protected the process against officials and parliamentarians who sought to control it.

The process began with an inter-community meeting in Gourma, which used the facilitation group's basic design. Its immediate success created a widespread demand for meetings elsewhere as the strategy responded to a deeply felt need. The process seemed to release unstoppable social forces for change. Yet the NCA had

insufficient funds to support additional meetings and it seemed politically risky for it to be responsible for the entire process throughout the north. Instead, by joining with other donors, including the Canadian, German, and Swiss development agencies and by obtaining funds from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they created a 'Fund for Reconciliation and Peace Consolidation in Northern Mali' (FAR-Nord). Lode became coordinator with the other facilitators' continued involvement, joined by representatives of the consortium partners. In response to demand, a total of 37 community meetings were organized across the north with the support of the fund.

## Inter-community meeting strategy

The meetings were designed for communities who shared the same territory, were dependent on the same resources and shared the same market place, so that they could discuss the problems caused or aggravated by the war. This organizing principle ignored the official administrative subdivisions created in the colonial era that were designed to divide and control previously strong and inter-dependent communities. As there was no official or other obvious leadership structure on this level, the facilitation group selected organizers for each inter-community meeting based on an assessment of the individual's integrity, position in the area and capacity to convene such a meeting. This was important because in Mali the glue that binds society together is personal relations and trust; people do not deal with a 'representative of something' but rather with a person.

The facilitation group developed a list of problems stemming from the war and asked the communities to develop generally accepted solutions so that their economic and social life could function again. These included: how to verify information before taking action; a common approach towards armed bandits; strategies for reintegrating demobilized fighters and refugees; processes for collecting and controlling firearms; and solutions to conflicts over land and water use rights. The facilitation group cautioned the communities to avoid discussing issues where the solution was not within their control, as it would divert the discussion from the main issues and led to disempowered frustration.

The facilitation group also formulated the categories of people who should be involved in decision-making roles. These included: all traditional leaders, all religious leaders and all leaders in the emerging modern civil society including women's and youth groups. Local politicians, representatives of the government administration, the armed forces and development organizations could only attend as observers. These guidelines made it possible for the communities to renew their traditional dialogue so as to repair relations, without the 'assistance' of intermediaries who might usurp the process.

Some funds were received from NCA but they were insufficient to cover all the costs. This meant that the organizer had to find financing elsewhere, typically from within the community. NCA decided not to require accounts of expenditures, instead insisting that the money should be controlled according to local customs for the use of common resources. This involved a significant level of trust but also underscored the central responsibility of the organizers, who would have to live with the consequences of the meeting's success or failure. The organizer was asked to ensure that decisions were recorded in official minutes, with the signatures of the official representatives to prove all the communities had attended it. This document served as the *de facto* 'receipt' for the NCA funds. The facilitation group's conditions were listed in a contract between the main organizer and Lode that formed the legal basis for the meeting. It was co-signed by two witnesses, with God invoked as a witness with this sentence at the end of each contract: "May the almighty and the all merciful God bless the efforts of his humble servants – Amen." Because religion had not been misused in the rebellion, it was an obvious connector in the reconciliation process.

The organizers did not accept all details of the facilitation group's strategy. Most added two elements. First, they discussed development issues – usually by making long lists of aspirations without any indication of priorities or roles for local participation. The local communities did not yet have the capacity to formulate strategies for local economic development, yet in many places it marked the beginning of a more responsible attitude towards development issues. It was also significant because the lists indicated a growing interest in education on all levels and on promoting the status of women. Second, they tended to issue open invitations to participate in the meeting. This had the positive consequence of increasing the representativeness and legitimacy of the meeting. It also indicated the strength of the organizers' commitment because they had to fund the additional costs of accommodating more people. Despite the facilitation group's encouragement, participants representing groups such as women and youth played a more marginal role than traditional leaders at this stage in the process. But marginalized occupational groups – such as blacksmiths – and individuals with a strong personality, including women and young people, had important positions in some localities.

## Inter-community meetings in practice

There was considerable preparation in advance of each meeting. For each meeting, the main organizer travelled for several weeks around their region to discuss the process with key people, trying to convince them to participate with a positive attitude and to address any obstacles to their involvement. This sometimes included settling long-standing disputes. They generally discussed



the issues and identified the positions likely to be taken so that the organizer could begin to understand the main substantive issues that needed to be addressed.

Each meeting was attended by between 300 and 1,800 people. As there were too many people to have long meetings, they generally took place over one or two days. The meetings were typically opened by a plenary session with formal speeches, a presentation of the outline of the procedures, and selection of members for the topical commissions. Each commission consisted of ten to thirty members who were assigned to formulate proposals on the main topic areas. Most often, there were commissions on development and on security, and sometimes a third commission on another topic. A proposal on the topic was usually put forward by the main organizer, who in the course of the preparatory consultations had carefully taken into account a balance between the positions of all types of groups and professions in the area. The proposals were then deliberated in the commission while most of the participants gathered in small groups, settled private problems and found partners for planned projects. Periodically, commission members consulted relevant others as required. The general approach was to seek solutions to problems on all levels. The meeting was concluded with a final plenary meeting to approve or modify each commission's proposals.

The meetings were never chaired by outsiders. The main organizer generally formed a group of 'wise men' to chair the meetings and who shared the responsibility between themselves. Members of the facilitation group were occasionally present at the meetings but refrained from trying to use too much influence. The inter-community

meetings also provided an opportunity for people to address outstanding conflicts and feelings of enmity, where they found persons who could mediate. Often they used readings from the Koran that exhorted believers to reconcile and forgive.

All decisions were made by consensus. If somebody understood that there was no hope for consensus behind their position - but was not willing to accept a public defeat - they would 'happen' to be absent at the conclusion. It would be considered inappropriate for them to raise the issue again after this stage. Yet the organizers felt that there were no constraints to people making last comments or objections in the final plenary. Usually, however, this session did not last long because commission members had already looked for compromises between the known positions of the influential figures. There were some occasions when the plenary rejected the commission's proposals. Then they needed the time to develop an acceptable agreement.

## Outcomes of the meetings

The participants in each meeting chose members for a follow-up commission to carry out the decisions. In some respects, these commissions could be seen as the first relatively democratically elected bodies in rural northern Mali. Yet they did not have much money for follow-up activities and were hampered by the need to rent vehicles to travel long distances to meet with important figures. Yet they did their best and approached local authorities, when such authorities were available in the area, to settle specific problems. They sought to implement strategies to resolve local disputes over land



and water resources and in some cases they negotiated with bandits and combatants from the movements. In most cases they found a solution.

Although there were variations in the conclusions of the different inter-community meetings, the overall pattern was surprisingly similar. There was overwhelming agreement that the authority of the state should be restored based on the principles of equality and justice. The process of talking together and developing shared proposals helped to break down the wall of distrust between groups and individuals. In most places, there were also significant practical outcomes. Market places reopened immediately; armed robbery was dramatically reduced; and numerous combatants were convinced that the peace was real and consequently joined the demobilization camps and turned in their weapons. In many areas, inhabitants began to implement the new strategies for resolving long-standing community disputes, thus significantly reducing tensions.

Yet the process met with some resistance from those with an interest in maintaining the status quo. For example, leaders of the refugees in Burkina Faso tried to stop the process because they made considerable amounts of money by inflating the number of refugees and embezzling the surplus funds. Because the inter-community meetings were not organized around the electoral districts, parliamentarians were not formally part of the process. Some feared a loss of influence because until that time they could claim to be the exclusive representatives of the people, whereas the inter-community meetings had empowered another group.

## Consolidation and follow-up meetings

After the success of the inter-community meetings, some thought it would be useful to consolidate the process and assist it into the next phase. The aim was to develop a strategy for immediate follow-up to the six inter-community meetings that had been organized in the Gourma area. Yet these 'consolidation meetings' were a failure and only one took place. The principal problem was that the initiative did not emerge out of the felt need of the communities but was promoted by the facilitation group. This lack of community ownership was compounded by an inadequate strategy. This was evident when the participants focussed on discussing per diems and travel costs, mostly because they did not view it as their own meeting. This contrasted sharply with the inter-community meetings when money was never contested, despite the need for organizers to gather considerable local resources. The facilitation group had to recognize that it was not the right moment and not the right approach. It was a powerful lesson that reminded the group of their role as facilitators rather than as leaders.

Local communities had taken the lead; they would decide when and how the next steps would take place.

It seemed that most communities needed time to absorb their experiences. Their first goal was to participate in the national Flame of Peace reconciliation ceremony. They then needed time to implement the decisions made at the first round of meetings, to reflect on recent events and to identify issues to address in the next phase. It took approximately a year and a half of analysis and preparation before the time was ripe for a follow-up process. But the cooperation between the facilitators and the communities had created a mutual trust and respect that lasted during this time.

After a period of reflection, in 1997 local leaders approached the Commissariat of the North to ask for permission and financial support for a process to address their basic problems in post-conflict peacebuilding. Their plans revealed the need for a new round of consultations and a new determination to participate in the decision-making process. Virtually all wanted to understand and influence the national process of political decentralization. Most also sought solutions to resolve local conflicts that might lead to serious violence and many wanted to address the increase in armed banditry affecting their communities.

The Commissariat wanted to encourage these efforts and asked the UNDP for support in the context of its 'Good Governance' programme. The Commissioner called upon the facilitation group to become involved, along with a few new facilitators and joined occasionally by a representative of the Ministry of the Interior. Their role was to elaborate a strategy and decide on the appropriate amount of economic support for each meeting. The new programme began in October 1997 and was based on a similar approach to the initial round of inter-community meetings. They aimed to: reinforce inter-community ties and dialogue in order to continue to repair the social ties that had been torn away by the rebellion; improve the local security situation through a voluntary disarmament of the civilian population; promote consensual solutions to local conflicts over land and water resources; and reinforce the process of democratization and decentralization. The programme structure was highly diverse. It included four massive meetings in the border areas with Mauritania, Algeria and Niger involving participants from communities on both sides of the border in order to reinforce security in the border areas. It also involved 95 local community meetings and 11 reconciliation missions – consisting of small groups of influential persons who worked with the protagonists to develop workable solutions to problems, mostly regarding resource disputes.

## Outcomes of the follow-up meetings

The meetings proved highly effective for resolving resource disputes. The lesson drawn by the facilitators was that only those whose lives depended on these resources should participate in the decision-making; others should only be present as observers. The meetings also served as a training ground for participatory democracy. Every time local communities organized a successful meeting, their self confidence grew and they became increasingly aware that the decisions belonged to them. The national leadership was also shown that local democracy was viable.

The meetings were also valuable as processes for promoting reconciliation. The inter-community meetings served as unofficial local 'truth commissions'. Participants had a forum for stating their concerns in public before deciding whether to forgive each other. For example, at one meeting a participant raised an issue that implied strong criticism of someone who worked for United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The latter tried to stop the intervention by requesting: "Let us turn that page once and for all" to which the answer was: "yes we shall turn it but first we need to identify exactly the content of the page to make sure that both of us shall turn the same page."

These follow-up meetings also addressed the ongoing challenge of disarmament and in two places they collected weapons on a large scale. Many northerners insisted that they had bought the weapons during a time when the state could not guarantee security and they wanted to be refunded for their purchases. Yet through these meetings, they agreed that payment for weapons exchange would be directed instead to their community through the financing of development activities, instead of personal payments. Although the Belgian government sponsored a programme to do this, some remained reluctant to hand over weapons because of ongoing security problems. Nevertheless, there was significant progress toward voluntary disarmament.

## Institutionalizing the outcomes

One of the most significant underlying causes of the war was the under-development of the north. Based on the experiences of the inter-community meeting process, since 1997 a number of development programmes that cover large parts of the north have been based on the principle of local responsibility. Some international donors have relinquished control over rural development project financing, although they retain some input into the way the money is used. The approach goes well beyond an advanced participatory method to the actual transfer of responsibility for all aspects of management to local communities and their newly-elected municipal councils. Members of the facilitation group played key

roles in helping to design and manage it. NCA was one of the first donors to develop this approach – resulting in a 90.5 per cent increase in funds available for direct project financing after they ceased their own operational activities. (It is worth noting NCA is considered to run its project very well.) The French government, followed by some UN agencies and the European Union also used these principles to guide their financing of large development programmes in Gao and the Timbuktu province. In each of these projects, formal responsibility for managing the budget is shared between communities, associations or individuals, and the council. In a context of limited material resources, it can be more efficient – as well as empowering – for those most directly affected by projects to have responsibility for them.

Between 2000 and 2002, there has been a new round of organized inter-community meetings, with more than a hundred conducted or planned. The initiative was a continuation of the former follow-up programme, with the same group of facilitators who saw that support of this kind would still be necessary for a year or two. The financing came from Norway (75%) and the Malian government (25%). In many respects the meetings have similar objectives to the other follow-up meetings but there are some new elements. Of the fifty meetings organised in 2001, ten were organized by youth for youth and fifteen were organized by women for women. These sector-specific meetings have resulted in new issues for the public agenda, with potentially lasting significance for shaping inter-community relations.

Delicate social processes such as peacebuilding typically need continual nurturing. Yet the previously flexible Commissariat of the North has been replaced by a new highly bureaucratic structure. An informal and creative approach towards dialogue with local communities is no longer possible and community generated recommendations are less influential in policy-making. The new municipal councils are well informed, however, and it would be difficult for them to disregard the recommendations from the meetings. Inter-community meetings have become part of the local strategy for managing local affairs and most communities now have sufficient experience to conduct meetings without a central group of facilitators.

The success of the Malian experience of peacebuilding relied on equality of respect for modern analytical approaches and traditional knowledge based on the experiences of several generations. It emerged out of a dialogue between tradition and modernity on one hand and between north and south on the other. If one partner tried to dominate the process, it did not work. All participants learned to have a personal interest in the success of others, which became the heart of the process of conflict transformation.