conciliation resources

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Angola, imperfect peace

A new report on Angola's drawn-out civil war draws important lessons for other African conflicts, says Huw Spanner.

No one can pretend that Angola offers a shining role model to the rest of Africa. Every attempt to make peace in the civil war, that first broke out in 1975, failed until government forces succeeded in killing Jonas Savimbi, the leader of Unita, 27 years later – which would seem to recommend violence as the most effective way to resolve conflict. Moreover, peacebuilding is not proceeding as smoothly as it might, and the secessionist war in the enclave of Cabinda is still grinding on.

Nevertheless, a major report published by Conciliation Resources draws important lessons from Angola's recent history – which the authors believe can be applied to other armed conflicts across the continent. From Military Peace to Social Justice? is the fruit of a two-year analysis of the successive peace processes that sought to bring to an end the civil war. Editor, Guus Meijer, describes the project as "something of a challenge" but the 14 report authors argue that valuable lessons can be learnt, even from failure.

Most controversially, they reject the "myth of redemptive violence", pointing out that when one side wins a war outright it has no great incentive to understand and deal with the grievances of those it has defeated. Military victory encourages a winner-takes-all mentality rather than the "dialogue, negotiation, respect for other points of view and eventual compromise" that are the stuff of democracy.

For sure, the intractability of conflicts like that in northern Uganda between the government and Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army – not to mention the uncompromising rhetoric of the so-called "war against terror" – has encouraged belief in "the one-bullet solution". But in Angola the fact that the MPLA and its supporters now have a virtually free hand means that, almost two years after the formal end of the war, there is growing frustration, disillusion and unrest – not only among supporters of Unita. There are still no effective opposition parties to hold the executive to account and to channel people's concerns. There is also a pressing need to reform the constitution and hold elections.

In Cabinda, meanwhile, "the shape of a possible settlement is relatively

clear", but what is missing is a process to bring it about. The government has been taking advantage of the fragmentation of the separatist movement, but here too the lesson needs to be learnt that military victory is unlikely to create the conditions for a just and sustainable peace. One important step the government should take, the report says, is to engage the Catholic Church as a mediator - rather than alienate it.

It is ironic that all the parties to the civil war – the MPLA, Unita and, initially, the FNLA – fought in the name of democracy. So says Filomeno Vieira-Lopes, one of the authors of the report who is involved in a broad range of civil society initiatives. One of the biggest problems for Angola is that the forces that genuinely championed democracy were those that emerged outside the conflict. Because the three national liberation movements each claimed to speak and act exclusively for the whole nation, they actually suppressed the political pluralism that is essential in a country like Angola, with a population amalgamated from many cultures and traditions.

In fact, this exclusivity is a common problem for national liberation movements, which then struggle to adapt to (and are reluctant to promote) a pluralist political system, with non-partisan state institutions. Furthermore, organizations that have long been structured hierarchically to fight a war find it difficult to become open to internal debate and democracy themselves. There are lessons here, the report observes, for countries such as Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It is clear in Angola that peace must go hand-in-hand with democracy, but is democracy always a recipe for peace - even in countries where one ethnic group forms the majority? "I don't think that any conflict in Africa is essentially ethnic, though ethnicity – and religion, too, and other forms of identity – become mobilised.'" says Guus Meijer. "Even in countries like Rwanda and Zimbabwe, though these identities are real, they are not necessarily eternal and they can be accommodated and played down politically."

In Angola, where ethnicity did play a major part in the conflict, there is also a very strong national sentiment which could be the basis for consensus.

Filomeno Vieira-Lopes emphasises that democracy should involve and empower every member of society, not just every group, and key to this is the concept of citizenship. There is, says Guus Meijer, "a very

positive debate about this going on across the whole of southern Africa, which is setting new norms and standards". In Angola, it has helped that almost 30 years of war had already acclimatised people to the idea of women playing prominent roles traditionally reserved for men, a trend that the international community should encourage.

The report notes the importance of the principled involvement of the international community. One reason for the failure of all the earlier peace processes was that outside interests – both global and regional powers competing for influence and transnational corporations looking for profit – colluded in marginalizing those sections of Angolan society that were calling for dialogue and negotiation. And in fact, despite being excluded from the peace talks and subject still to political restrictions, Angolan civil society has proved to be a vital force, with growing potential. As the international community helps to rebuild the country it needs to take care to strengthen local capacity rather than replace it.

The report also notes the potential, for both good and evil, of Angola's exceptional natural resources – in particular its oil and diamonds. These were neither a cause nor a motive of the war (though they certainly helped to finance the rival armies) but they may well be a source of instability and conflict in the future. This might especially be the case if the "largely corrupt" élite that emerged in the nineties continues to grow wealthy, while the rest of the populace remains impoverished and excluded. This lesson has obvious relevance to countries such as Sudan, Gabon and the two Congos, as well as Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé & Principe, where large deposits of oil have lately been discovered.

What are the positive dynamics that help to build peace? Certainly, the battle against poverty is crucial. One counterintuitive lesson is that, as long-overdue land reform proceeds in Angola, former enemies (the ex-soldiers of the MPLA, Unita and the FNLA, and the peasant populations that supported them) find that they have common interests that are bringing them together. The media also have a vital role to play – for hatred is defused as people learn that "the other side" are not as bad as wartime propaganda made out. The report notes the need for "a strategic redefinition" of the role of the media in a democratic society, as well as for measures to ensure wider coverage outside the capital.

Other priorities in breaking the negative cycle of violence are disarming the general population (there are three to four million small arms in civilian hands), and moving investment away from the military and

paramilitary sectors.

On the down side, the authors observe that although the disarming and demobilising of the various armies has been judged largely a success by both the government and the international community, too little attention was paid to the social ramifications. The return of former soldiers to their old communities or their resettlement in new ones can be a further cause of conflict, especially where resources or jobs are scarce. The demobilisation also failed to provide adequately for the needs of child soldiers, who are very vulnerable once they have been separated from their former adult colleagues.

Finally, the report regrets that, although there has been talk of "national reconciliation", little has been done to address the distrust and pain caused by the war. The general amnesty given to former soldiers for crimes committed during the conflict may have been a precondition for the end of fighting, but it has entrenched many injustices. It is crucial that there should be a public apology for these crimes, and opportunities to discuss and tell stories about what took place.