What is reconciliation?
Reconciliation is about rebuilding broken relations and relationships. If that sounds soft, or non-contentious, it most certainly is not. Nor is it optional: it is not something nice we will get around to when the harder-edged stuff is completed. Politicians in a new, post-agreement context urgently need working relations if they are to make politics function. Communities in a new post-war society urgently need to learn to co-exist so that the new society can mirror the new politics and begin to function without violence. We are talking about politicians and communities who have most likely hated each other, even killed each other, for a significant part of recent history. So nothing about this is soft or easy. On the contrary: it is hugely challenging. And the stakes are very high: if politics fails, or community relations revert to violence, then all is lost. That is the task of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not an easy option. Reconciliation is tough, challenging, hard-nosed. Reconciliation is not just for peaceful people. Reconciliation has to happen between people who have hated and hurt. Reconciliation is not the gentle side of justice. Reconciliation is as important as justice. And as necessary. And as difficult.

Reconciliation is about rebuilding broken relations and relationships. If that sounds soft, or non-contentious, it most certainly is not.”

Reconciliation is the process of rebuilding damaged relations, without which society will not function properly again in any of its dimensions: politics, social interaction, justice, economy, education... everything. It means dealing with the past to construct an agreed future. This involves examining past relations and behaviours, acknowledging them and their consequences, and coming to terms with them and with each other in such a way as to share new relations for that agreed future.

A modest reconciliation
Before going any further, it is worth mentioning that reconciliation is no more of a magic bullet than any other approach or method in peacebuilding. It never works perfectly – it sometimes fails completely – but generally it makes a significant contribution to post-violence reconstruction. And it is difficult to find a post-violence society that prospered without a reconciliation process. Its effectiveness is based on a range of factors: context, history, political will, resources, quality of design and so on. Given that no society on earth is completely free of inequality and injustice, we should certainly not expect such results from societies emerging from the devastation of violent conflict. They face massive challenges, and we should be modest in our claims for any approach, including reconciliation, that might assist their progress.

Reconciliation: a process and a goal
Reconciliation is both a process and a goal. Practitioners, like me, have tended to put all their focus on the process. This is because most of us have all but dismissed the end-state of reconciliation as being too idealistic. Too often, it has been hyped up to be some kind of paradise of perfect interpersonal harmony, and we wonder how on earth people who have been fighting could possibly want or achieve that.
There are two reasons for this focus on process over goal. Firstly, while we may be inspired by such a vision, we suspect that in the real world we need to focus on the process of improving relations, which is challenging enough without setting ourselves such impossible targets as perfect harmony. Secondly, we know that many victims initially reject reconciliation because they see it as a demand to forgive and learn to love their former oppressors. In our wisdom, we suspect they are objecting to the end-state of reconciliation and that a shift of focus on to process will help us to convince them otherwise. Although, confusingly, sometimes we persist in this even when people involved directly in a reconciliation situation insist on their need to forgive, to understand, to pardon, or to heal.

How a reconciliation process is designed for a particular context obviously applies very specifically to that context: the history, nature, scale, scope, duration of the violent period; the nature and depth of the difference(s) that underpinned the conflict; the culturally accepted methods of conflict management, and so on. Thus, for some, reconciliation will involve healing (of selves, psyches, relationships, ‘the nation’, etc.). For some, it will involve forgiveness in some form. For others, it will involve neither of these.

While contextualisation is very important, it cannot provide excuses not to tackle the core practices of reconciliation that are necessary in every post-violence context.”

But while contextualisation is very important, it cannot provide excuses not to tackle the core practices of reconciliation that are necessary in every post-violence context. Those practices do not even need to be termed ‘reconciliation’, as long as the basic requirements are met: rebuilding damaged relations so that social functions can recommence.

Realistic reconciliation
So the goal of reconciliation tends generally to be idealistic, but the process needs to be realistic.

But if a realistic reconciliation process involves former enemies building working relations and grudgingly learning to cooperate, to tolerate and to co-exist, what end-state does it produce? Clearly not perfect harmony and peace, by any means. What, then, is its goal? Why can’t we have an equally realistic goal?

Perhaps that ideal end-state of harmony should remain in our sight always because, like all ideals, it serves the important purpose of inspiring us to keep struggling towards it.

Here’s a realistic goal for a pragmatic process to work towards: a polity and society increasingly based on equality and fair rules that apply to all; a social compact that may creak as it functions but which steadily comes to include everyone; a redesigned governance system that prohibits the exclusionary practices of the past; an increasingly self-regulating system of justice that provides safety and security, and prevents and punishes violence from any quarter. In short, a society increasingly at peace with itself, in which all its members can begin to believe in a better future and a sustainable peace.

This is not paradise by a long shot. But it is tangible, attainable and acceptable. It is a context in which healing and forgiveness, when they are required, can begin to take place. And, if we’re really lucky, it might even lead someday to that state of perfect harmony.

Reconciling past and future
So reconciliation requires a process to deal with the past which acknowledges [and thus reduces] the hurt, alienation, and sense of injustice felt by victims, and which acknowledges [and thus officially denounces] the responsibility and guilt of offenders.

The past is a central dimension of reconciliation. But reconciliation is essentially about the future: moving from a divided past towards a shared future. And so it means, at its core, building relations for the future. That happens in two dimensions. In the first, we engage in practices overtly labelled as reconciliation activities: meetings, dialogues and joint projects to focus on our differences and divisions, our hurts, our deeds, our history, our needs, our identities, our cultures. These activities help us to get to know and begin to understand our former enemies who are now our new partners, as they begin to understand us.

In the second dimension, we engage in cooperative activities that most likely have no reconciliation label on them. They are, rather, activities that represent the normalising of social relations within a society. We naturally begin to do all the things that need to be done to build our society: the things that used to be done separately, or with bias and exclusion. We begin to cooperate on all the social issues and functions that a society needs to develop: doing politics together; devising social policies for education, health, employment, resource-sharing, housing and so on; forming the habits of social, cultural and economic co-operation and interaction; setting the rules for sharing our future. And when it comes to those rules, we address justice for the future.

Reconciliation versus justice
Transitional justice is one of the most important new concepts in peacemaking to emerge over the last 15 years. But in its creation, the international legal community has done us, and itself, a serious injustice. In establishing transitional justice, it did so at the expense of the equally important concept of reconciliation, and in the process it over-extended transitional justice beyond its means. Reconciliation and justice, perversely, came to be seen in competition or opposition to each other, and in this falsely created zero-sum fight, justice won. We urgently need to rehabilitate reconciliation in this relationship.

That is because all the key ingredients of dealing with the past – retribution, reparation, restoration, acknowledgement, accountability, making amends, ending impunity, guaranteeing...
non-recurrence – came to rely almost exclusively on justice. Transitional justice, to be exact. Reconciliation was relegated to a side-issue, or a minor follow-on, once justice had been completed. More, it was sidelined to something vaguely emotional or interpersonal – something rather too idealistic – that might be the feel-good business of community leaders or cultural leaders, but was probably not a priority for politicians and national leaders to bother with. Instead, transitional justice would bring all that was required to deal with the past and move into the future.

But transitional justice became over-used. First, it was narrowed down to a process that dealt with past misdeeds only, and prioritised offenders over victims, offences over suffering, punishment over acknowledgement. While transitional justice claimed to include Truth and Reconciliation Commissions as ‘non-judicial’ ingredients of its process, in fact non-judicial elements rapidly became minor outliers to a heavily court-based retributive process. In all the tribunals, hearings and legal proceedings, victims took second place to judges, defendants, counsel and due process.

Second, the ‘transition’ dimension of this retributive justice began to disappear, as punishment for past wrongs became an end in itself for the international community. Transition, it seemed, took us only from the past to the present, and ignored the future.

Third, beyond the justice meted out to address these past actions, within transitional justice little or no attention was paid to the reform and re-design of justice structures for the future: justice to address structural violence, justice to guarantee fairness, justice which would ensure that citizens would buy in to the new society offered at the end of the transition. Or, if such attention was paid (in the shape of constitutional reform, legal reform, judicial reform, security sector reform, and so on), it was disconnected from the transitional past-oriented justice, and seen as separate. But the prospect of a fair future is essential to an effective transition into that future. Justice for the past and for the future would both be strengthened by being properly linked together in the transitional process.

Reconciliation with justice
Justice for the future is at the heart of reconciliation.

Moreover, and crucially, this justice for the future is not simply a key part of peacemaking and reconciliation, though it is that; it is also a key part of the painful calculation that victims are forced to make in deciding how little justice, and of what kind, will suffice to move them out of their past and into a liveable future. No justice process is perfect: not all offenders get punishment; not all victims get satisfaction. Most victims, in fact, get much less than they deserve. Ultimately, many of them are forced to a further compromise on their needs in order to help society move forward. An expectation of a fair future – a just society for my children, for example – becomes a part of that compromise.

Reconciliation and justice are integrally interlinked and interdependent. Some things they provide separately (reconciliation, for example, does not in itself supply retributive justice, and transitional justice does not in itself alter relationships, even though they will both contribute towards both outcomes). But it is in their overlap that we need to bring some clarity. In particular, we have to recognise that reconciliation provides some vital ingredients of justice. Acknowledgement, for one example. Accountability, for another. Both of these are crucial elements of justice, but are often best produced from reconciliation processes.

Reconciliation is also a society-wide process, unlike retributive justice which focuses on law-breakers. There is always a constituency of bystanders and beneficiaries: those who committed no crimes but who benefitted from the injustice that prevailed – or at least looked the other way and thus gave it their tacit support. They will never be put in the dock, but their attitudes and beliefs, and their responsibilities, must be addressed, along with everyone else’s. They are constituent parts of the communities whose relations must be challenged and changed, in a process that engages all of society.

One final thought: transitional justice often stresses the necessity of bringing an end to impunity and guaranteeing that the horror of the past will not return. Immediately, then, we turn to legal and judicial processes to provide these things. But what is the best guarantee of non-recurrence? What most effectively ensures that a society will not revert to division, violence and violation? Laws will certainly help, although perhaps nothing can provide a cast-iron guarantee. But the best hope of non-recurrence is a society at peace with itself. That means one where justice (as accountability and acknowledgement) has been done for the past and where justice (as fairness) is being implemented for the present and the future. And it means one where difference is managed non-violently, where there is no need to break the rules any more: a society where relations have been rebuilt in a process of reconciliation.

Without a process of reconciliation to build or rebuild relations, society will have difficulty functioning in any meaningful way, let alone functioning to build sustainable peace and permanent change. Reconciliation is not some peace-and-love state of paradise where all are one. It is an awkward, difficult process where former enemies find painful ways to begin co-operating for a better future.

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