Liberia between Reconciliation Commission and Roadmap – Steps Forward in a Halted Process?

By T. Debey Sayndee and Silke Pietsch

KAICT Policy Brief No. 1 – June 2013

As the nation's oldest institution of learning the University of Liberia in 2006 established the Kofi A. Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) to serve as a center of excellence for producing the appropriate human capital required for national recovery and peace building in Liberia. KAICT envisions a future where public dialogue and rigorous research and analysis are endemic to policymaking and implementation in Liberia. It is a future in which a new generation of Liberians, endowed with abilities for critical and innovative thinking, lead in the definition, reconstruction, and administration of the Liberian state.

- ❖ *The Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (2012, p.2) states that "[...], efforts on national peacebuilding and reconciliation stalled due to the lack of coherent strategy and coordination framework" and therefore focuses on coherence of institutions, structures, mechanisms and human resources to support national healing and reconciliation*
- ❖ *Nevertheless, reconciliation and resolution are not new to Liberian history. Yet an in depth analysis of those processes is missing, hampering meaningful lessons learned and evaluation to inform future processes, projects and mechanisms.*
- ❖ *Moreover, genuine reconciliation in Liberia should serve two aspects in order to tackle root causes to conflict and crisis: policy reconciliation as to improve public policies and their implementation towards equality and fair play as well as group/relationship reconciliation as to mediate between different people, actors, stakeholders, groups of interest, in communities and on national level*
- ❖ *Ongoing politicization since the start of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a major hindrance to meaningful and genuine reconciliation that is yet lacking a vision accepted by a notable majority and making political will swinging discussions and decisions*

After 10 years of relative peace, Liberia is still emerging from a devastating conflict that in essence spanned more than 14 years. A Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2003 ended the fighting and paved the way for the country's first and second post-conflict elections in 2005 and 2011. On its way to foster peace and stability, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act of 10 June 2005, was conducted nevertheless leaving behind mixed feelings and contested opinions. The following policy brief is based on various Public Policy Dialogue Forums and Student Consultations on reconciliation organized by the KAICT from August – December 2012. The **Public Policy Dialogue Forum** is a monthly gathering of policy practitioners and users as well as Liberian youth to meet and interact in what has been code named "Stepping back to do some thinking"

Introduction

Reconciliation processes in Liberia are not new. Forms and shapes have changed but the issues at hand especially root causes to the last conflict remain almost the same. It is estimated that Liberia has undergone about 90 wars since 1821/22. Thus the main question for reconciliation in Liberia is how societal wrong-doings from the early years of Liberia's founding were and are approached in order to progressively deal with them and to effect change in the situations of ongoing injustice, marginalization, and the like which result in disunity, rancorousness and divide. Various examples of reconciliation attempts and/or resolution throughout Liberian history can be made: for instance, the creation of the last four counties of Liberia and their incorporation into the legislature of the country can be interpreted as an example for inclusion to combat marginalization and exclusion. The Unification Policy from 1964 and the Open Door Policy may also be interpreted in a similar manner because they opened the door to greater participation in politics and access to social and economic opportunities for previously marginalized groups. Nevertheless, events of 1975-79(the rise of political pluralism) and the decades following showed clearly that efforts made to create an inclusive, non-discriminatory nation still lacked essential basics for a truly coherent state.

The TRC was mandated to investigate gross human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian laws, as well as mass killings, sexual violations and murder. By addressing the magnitude of atrocities, the TRC was expected to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation. In September 2009 the TRC published their final report, probably being one of the most contested reports and official papers since the CPA of 2003. Next to recommendations, the final report contains two lists of individuals being recommended for lustration and prosecution including the current president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf for her involvement in the civil war. Although the Report has been passed through the legislature and the Independent National Commission of Human Rights has been established as the major body to implement the report, very little if anything has been done towards its implementation.

A Bid to Define Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a contested term that can possess a multitude of meanings while being prone to subjective interpretation and understanding. At least, most will agree that it is not a quick fix solution but rather an ongoing process of discourse and implementing decisions leading to

improved social cohesion by establishing trust in a just society. In principle reconciliation is an act of settling differences between individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, countries and nations. It is an agreement between parties and people in order to create a process of change. A cardinal precondition is to be willing to understand each other and to put aside differences or grievances so as to be re-united. In that regard reconciliation can be identified with peace: genuine reconciliation is a pre-requisite for sustainable peace to bring together individuals and groups in harmony by healing the wounds of victims and helping to de-traumatize those affected. It is the means of paving the path for transformation of the Liberian society towards the fulfillment of a shared vision. Integral ingredients in this process are forgiveness and telling the truth. Forgiveness is a process by which individuals have the right to agree and accept the wrongs committed and admitted by others and are willing to move on. Nevertheless, contrary to the popular Liberian dogma "LET BY-GONES BE BY-GONES", genuine forgiveness only comes about through authentic and earnest truth telling and remorse.

> **Reconciliation needs to be understood in a manner where transformation of structures and systems are interdependently linked to building and/or rebuilding relationships.**

Thus, reconciliation as understood in the Liberian context must be divided theoretically into two aspects: policy reconciliation and group/relationship reconciliation. Policy reconciliation points to the need of improving policies towards equality and fair play, clarifying the interpretation and meaning, and raising awareness on rights resulting from said policies. Therefore reconciliation is the mediation between policies and people and communities. Group/ relationship reconciliation focuses on mediating between different people, actors, and stakeholders, interest-groups, ethnic or religious and so on. Hence, reconciliation is the expression of social cohesion symbolized by the way people interact with one another.

In addition, structural transformation towards a system of equality and inclusion must be understood as a cornerstone of reconciliation pointing at the nexus of reconciliation and ongoing nation building processes. This point further informs us about the role of socio-economic development from an environment prone to exclusion, marginalization and abuse of power to a just situation of equality and merit. This is a major pre-requisite for mending broken relationships, individually but also between citizens and government wherein the government works for the people of the country to the betterment of all. In response the citizens therefore

respect and accept established rules and regulations. Unity in this sense is an outcome of reconciliation and a constituent for successful reconciliation that creates an atmosphere of tolerance, acceptance and oneness.

Aspects of the Roadmap on Reconciliation

As mentioned in the Roadmap on Reconciliation, Draft 3 (2012, p.2)*"[…], efforts on national peacebuilding and reconciliation stalled due to the lack of coherent strategy and coordination framework, to organize the multiple government and civil society initiatives on peacebuilding and reconciliation."* In a bid to respond to this gap, the **Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation** is designed to foster coherence of institutions, structures, systems, mechanisms, and human resources to support national healing and reconciliation and strengthen efforts towards sustainable peace".

Aligned with other strategic policies[1], the roadmap is considered as a comprehensive framework that identifies critical components for reconciliation and defines reconciliation as "a multidimensional process of overcoming social, political, and religious cleavages" by mending and transforming relationships through healing the physical and psychological wounds from the civil war. Thereby reconciliation entails process *to confront and address* "historical and structural wrongs, particularly conflict root causes including ethno-politics, religious, social, and regional exclusion, corruption and impunity as well as human rights violations". (2012, p. 4). In order to reach its goals and fulfill its mandate through interventions the roadmap tackles the past while providing activities to manage the future.

> The roadmap defines three interrelated goals to be achieved:
>
> - Transforming individual, community and societal mindsets
>
> - Rebuilding and strengthening inter-group relations
>
> - Dismantling and replacing polarized institutions with more inclusive institutions as safeguards for 'never again'.

---

[1] Agenda for Transformation – Liberia's Medium Term Economic Growth and Development Strategy (2010 – 2017), Vision 2030,
New Deal of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and State building, Liberia Peacebuilding Programme (LPP)

Thereby the Liberian Government[2] through its Ministries and designated commissions in collaboration with the international community and selected Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations is supposed to work along 12 thematic components. Implementation of these components will be organized in short to long-term six 3-year program cycles over the next 18 years. Those Interventions include but are not limited to:

- ✓ Community-based truth telling and atonement as well as provisions of psychosocial recovery in order to account for the past.
- ✓ Social cohesion, understood as the benchmark for reconciliation, shall be achieved by political dialogue.
- ✓ Youth and women's recovery and empowerment.
- ✓ Memorialization supported by mainstreaming conflict prevention and mediation.
- ✓ Writing an inclusive people's history that fosters collective identity and provides for a national vision are main components of planning for the future.

The roadmap is based on defining reconciliation as: *"[…] a multidimensional process of overcoming social, political, and religious cleavages; mending and transforming relationships; healing the physical and psychological wounds from the civil war, as well as confronting and addressing historical wrongs including the structural root causes of conflicts in Liberia."[3]*

Voices from the field – Opinions, Views and Valid Critique

Surrounding the development of the roadmap, several critique and suggestions have been made to give input to the much needed and discussed reconciliation process. The following is a compilation of arguments collected during the above mentioned forums.

Obstacles to Reconciliation As hindrance for genuine reconciliation, ongoing politicization of the process has been heavily critiqued and identified as being responsible for the halt in the process. In order to change that pre-condition and create an enabling environment, reconciliation must be located at the community level and perceived as communication between people. Additionally a general fear to repeat mistakes of the

> **Politicization as major spoiler to sincere reconciliation**

---

[2]With the Ministry of Internal Affairs as the lead ministry
[3]Reconciliation Roadmap, Draft 3

past has been described as responsible for being stuck in exploring new options without making considerable progress. In the same token Liberian history was identified as providing an excuse to come together and define a way forward as people. Thus, reconciliation was expressed as lacking a real vision that is accepted by a notable majority. This circumstance is responsible for the ongoing divide between (the new) elite and the rest of society which remains characterized by feelings of superiority and distrust. This divide coincides with a generation gap that only can be filled with acceptance and tolerance allowing for appreciating differences and accepting limitations.

Requirements for Reconciliation Heavily highlighted in all discussions were the creation of equal opportunities and the distribution of wealth and power as symbolizing genuine political will for change. Thus, it is reflected by inclusive governance and a society free of corruption and nepotism. Moreover, concerns for a truly reconciled Liberia should be one in which goods and services need to be equally distributed and accessible to all Liberians without preference or exclusion of certain groups or individuals. Land disputes, for example, are successfully prevented and regulated through clearly formulated policies and laws which are implemented on the basis of equal rights and access for everybody. Marginalization based on group membership or affiliation and discrimination is outdated; and jobs and scholarships are distributed based on merit system. In addition entitlement to equal pay for equal work and gender equity were

named specifically. Indispensable for implementing the requirements above are vibrant institutions based on principles of good governance. The only guarantee for sustainable peace is a social contract that is accepted, respected and consolidated. Development and implementation of public policies are for the good of everybody and sincerely leads to the provision of basic social services for everybody, guided by a code of conduct for officials which is reviewed and strongly followed.

Visions of a Reconciled Liberia Peaceful co-existence and unity amongst all Liberians are characterized by a tolerant and respectful society of open minds and hearts. Thus, religious, tribal, ethnic and class differences are vanished and substituted by a unified state built upon patriotism and solidarity. The Liberian society encourages diversity and values social, political, cultural and traditional differences. That includes a harmonization of the divide between modern and traditional way of life symbolized for example by a corresponding traditional and statutory justice system. The main characteristics defined are the high level of ethnic and tribal interactions based on understanding, trust, recognition and tolerance. Arts and Crafts were identified as major tools for communicating and addressing the divide and for building bridges by identifying with one another. That also contains an inclusive national history narrative that does not only start from1820 but embraces indigenous history and storytelling.

All these aspects and definitions eventually lead to a violent-free nation whereby violence encompasses actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/ or prevents people from reaching their full human potential. A pre-condition and current major challenge is to address problems openly and sincerely.

> *Liberia is a tolerant and respectful society of open minds and hearts. Religious, tribal, ethnic and class differences are vanished and substituted by a unified state built upon patriotism and solidarity. The Liberian society encourages diversity and values social, political, cultural and traditional differences.*