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## **Social Reconstruction: Trading Rifles for Ploughshares**

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Countries emerging from years of conflict, violence, and senseless destruction face a daunting task. These societies must literally trade their AK-47 rifles for ploughshares. They must quickly transform the instruments and culture of war into agents of reconciliation, reconstruction and development.

Moving from destruction and despair to order and hope is a task that countries such as Cambodia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Sri Lanka face today. Lebanon, Uganda and Vietnam have been grappling with the challenge for some years while Angola, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and South Africa have hardly started to address the problem. For far too many developing countries, development must start with building a new social and political order as the base for effective social policies and programs.

### **NO ROADMAPS**

Unfortunately, there are few useful roadmaps to social reconstruction. Countries begin the journey with little generalized experience to draw upon, exhausted physical and human resources, and, perhaps most difficult of all, a shaky consensus over the shape of the future.

The range of problems can appear overwhelming. Mozambique, for instance, has suffered ruthless violence and destruction over the past decade. Over four million of its 16 million people are internally displaced, one and a half million are refugees in neighbouring countries, and over one million Mozambicans are dead. Much of the population is highly vulnerable to widows, orphans, elderly people and the war disabled. Complicating matters are the many ex-combatants who represent an entire generation bred largely on violence.

Urban centres have expanded but without the infrastructure to support migrants fleeing the conflict zones. HIV infection and AIDS have spread unchecked while diseases that were under control have re-emerged with a vengeance. Mozambique is now one of the world's poorest countries, with an estimated per capita GNP of a meagre US\$80 in 1993. In such a situation questions outnumber answers and everything calls for urgent attention. The difficulties are confounded when intolerance and violence have displaced internal mechanisms of political accommodation and social order.

Rebuilding the social and political community must proceed alongside the job of repairing shattered infrastructure. Restoring people's confidence in state institutions is perhaps a critical first step in social reconstruction. The acceptance of the rule of law and the establishment of political order are key steps in this process. It is necessary to redefine the role of the state, local authorities, civil institutions, grassroots organizations and the private sector.

Establishing representative institutions that respond to the needs of the people, as well as serving reconstruction, is problematic in these situations, but it is a necessary condition for change. To be

meaningful and acceptable, the reconstruction process must be guided by an accurate reading of prevailing realities without becoming a prisoner of current circumstances. Solutions can neither be superimposed nor imported. They must be negotiated by the key social actors, including the hitherto warring factions.

The knowledge, structures, policies and actions that emerge from this highly interactive and pluralistic process will become the guiding principles for social reconstruction and development. Transforming conflict-oriented institutions and channelling their resources into political and social reconstruction present another set of challenges. Resettling refugees and displaced persons, turning former military personnel toward productive civilian activities, and designing national policies that transcend sectarian interests are difficult tasks indeed.

How can people who were bent on making war be reoriented to producing food, rebuilding schools, health centres and roads, and restoring faith in the future? The answer lies in galvanizing the inherent capabilities of communities to rebuild after adversity. However devastated individuals and communities may be, they still contain within themselves seeds of regeneration. They are not hapless victims but active agents of their own rejuvenation.

A profound challenge of social reconstruction is the opportunity to develop policies to reduce serious social inequalities. Some of these inequalities -- whether ethnic, racial, regional, religious or class-based -- no doubt shared in fueling the conflict in the first place. Social reconstruction must stand up to these inequalities or risk building a new order upon historical grievances. Acceptance of diversity and pluralism are central to designing policies and institutions oriented to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of society.

Increasingly, international actors, including the United Nations, donor agencies, development NGOs and humanitarian groups play important roles in peace-making, peace-keeping and rehabilitating war-torn societies. Their special responsibility is to avoid distorting reconstruction and long-term development.

External actors risk dominating the emerging social agenda in the very act of offering help. To be effective and sustainable over the long haul, external assistance should aim specifically at enabling war-torn societies to emerge from disabilities and poverty, rather than trapping them in relations of food aid, indebtedness and general dependency on the international community.

External agents can play a critical role by supporting the research and strategic planning that is vital to policy making at the local, national and international levels. Such initiatives can begin even while a country is engaged in conflict.

It is now widely recognized that there are no instant blueprints for social reconstruction. Yet the lessons learned in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Uganda need not be forgotten nor dismissed as inappropriate for the reconstruction of Somalia, Angola or Bosnia. Indeed, there is much to be done in laying the knowledge base for hastening the transition to peace along constructive lines.

Paradoxically, some of the most advanced research and development is often undertaken to prepare for war while planning for social reconstruction is typically put on hold until the guns fall silent. The international community has slowly come to understand how essential it is to prepare for peace. Recently, the heavy costs of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) have underscored the urgency of thinking about reconstruction long before a conflict ends.

Policy and action-oriented research have a vital role in exposing the roots of the conflict, in monitoring its course, in gathering basic data for intelligent decision making, and in creating long-term and appropriate strategies, policies and programs that draw upon painful experiences elsewhere. Already, an emerging research agenda recognizes that the international community must shift its focus from disaster relief to prevention and preparedness, from peace-keeping to peace-making and from crisis management to sustainable development.

At an April 1993 workshop on the "Challenge of Rebuilding Wartorn Societies" organized by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), participants identified several priorities for social science research. These include:

- the impact of the massive return to civilian life of ex-combatants in contexts where land, credit, government services and employment opportunities are scarce;
- strengthening or creating access by vulnerable groups to such essential goods and services as food, shelter and health care;
- identifying the appropriate roles of multilateral and bilateral agencies, the state, NGOs, community institutions, private enterprise and the informal sector in meeting social needs;
- designing long-term strategies for rebuilding the national economy while responding to immediate needs and demands;
- identifying the socio-psychological effects of violence and the break-up of families and communities with a view to providing special services for individuals and groups; and
- the relationship between foreign agencies, state institutions and local organizations in social reconstruction.

Clearly, the range of issues raised by social reconstruction requires different types of research with varying degrees of promise for immediate application. Rapid appraisal research could furnish answers for project design and delivery to meet urgent needs while longer-term research could shed light on persistent patterns of social organization, conflict and reconstruction. Any material and intellectual resources committed to research for post-war reconstruction promise much higher yields in peace and development than the massive financial aid that is currently being poured into countries emerging from conflict.

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