

**“Institutional building and Social cohesion for a Peaceful and Resilient Community”
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I. Institutional building, Social cohesion and peaceful and resilient community.

The three papers by, Eliane Ubalijoro¹, Frederick Burkle² and Paul Born³ around the theme of “Community Engagement and Healing in Times of Disaster: Retrieving the wisdom of those in need” have come as a strong reminder of the centrality of human good relationships in withstanding shocks and building resilience. Burkle affirms that “despite efforts to redefine the way we live, the sense of community is universal and essential to the human species.” Paul Born is even more dramatic as he stresses that “the best form of emergency preparedness is building a caring society. Not only a society of good citizens, but also one of good neighbors, where people know and help each other and live together peacefully and personally in physical place.” In her conclusion Ms. Ubalijoro notes that despite the government impressive economic successes and its laudable capacity to give back hope to Rwandans, “healing for Rwanda is still a journey as Rwanda grapples with conflict transformation, forgiveness and reconciliation while rebuilding community”.

The authors seem to suggest two sets of preparation that are needed for an effective disaster preparedness strategy and community resilience. On one hand they advocate for the building of institutions and systems that are accountable, democratic, transparent, and efficient in service delivery. These institutions must have good leaders and must be as participatory as possible. They must function according to laws and procedures governing the society. This type of preparation is based on tangibles, the visible part of the preparation. On the other hand, the authors suggest that beyond institutions building, the society should be able to strengthen its social capital. It should find ways of creating strong bonds among its members and humanize their relationships in ways such that members of the community care for one another in an “altruist citizenry” fashion. This building of strong social cohesion constitutes the intangibles of the strategy. It clearly emerges from the authors’ reflections a pressing invitation to accompany the institutions building and strengthening with the increase in social cohesion. It is only at this price that community resilience will be effective.

In my experience, the tangibles are very often given due attention to the detriment of the relational dimension of response strategy to disasters, especially in cases of manmade disasters such as war. For example, in the wake of the volcano eruption in Goma, East Democratic Republic of Congo in 2002, aid workers witnessed what they called “irrational behavior” of Congolese people. They first, instinctively, sought refuge in Rwanda when the Nyiragongo volcano erupted, threatening the total destruction of the town. They then returned almost immediately after only 24 hours to their unsafe Goma town rather than being recipients of humanitarian emergency assistance in the host country, Rwanda. Congolese

¹ Eliane Ubalijoro, “The face of healing in the Aftermath of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda: Personal Reflections”.

² Frederick Burkle, “The Limits to Our Capacity: The Realities of Community Engagement, Resiliency and Recovery in the 21st Century Crises.”

³ Paul Born, “Community Engagement and Healing in Times of Disaster: Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need”.

preferred more to face the risks of an active volcano than enjoying the safety offered by their Rwandan hosts.

In its report on the eruption, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) gave some of the reasons for this apparent “irrational behavior”. The report states that “salient issues informed the population’s reaction to the eruption: significant segments of the population of eastern DRC largely view the Rwandan Patriotic Army as an occupying force. The flight to Rwanda was a move to a hostile location; the population reversed course as soon as they judged it safe to return home. The Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), the Congolese rebel movement which controls the Kivus and Maniema provinces has limited popular legitimacy...” The report concluded that, among other reasons, “the behavior of the population seemed to be irrational given the volcanic activity, but (...) the decision to return [to Goma] after 24 hours was irrational in light of the information available at the time, but it was completely in line with the political situation.”⁴ In the same report, OCHA confessed that “many Goma-based staff admitted that in the chaos that followed the eruption, they lost sight of the political realities and were surprised by the quick return.”

It was evident that the “political realities” were characterized by the deeply strained relationships between the Congolese people and the government of Rwanda as well as the rebel group that was controlling their territory. Trust is the first casualty of a violent conflict. The Congolese did not simply trust the good intention of their neighbors because of these broken relationships. In other words, the tangible issues such as relief aid, attending to the wounded, setting up of shelters, distributing water, food etc. were attracting the attention of the aid workers. They lost sight or neglected to factor in their response strategy the state of relationships between Congolese locals and Rwandan government as well as the RCD rebel administration. Indeed, beside a strong military and security presence, this administration was weak in service delivery and suffered from a legitimacy deficit due to lack of participation and genuine representation of local communities. Congolese communities relied more on their strong social cohesion and solidarity than on rebel administration or aid workers. Their resilience rested on these intangibles.

Despite the fact the authors did not define what a peaceful society is, one can deduce from their submissions that a peaceful society is a society that not only enjoys good leadership, efficient institutions and structures that deliver quality services, security for all, etc. but also a society that is able to develop strong bond among its members, such that, in times of stress or shocks, a live solidarity is naturally put in motion. In many parts of Africa, this type of solidarity is embedded in the spirit of “ubuntu”⁵. Ubuntu is a

⁴ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “*The role of OCHA in the emergency operations following the eruption of the Nyiragongo Volcano in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo*”, Sept. 2002., Report by Stephen O’Malley, HEB.

⁵ “Ubuntu” : (Zulu/Xhosa pronunciation: [ùbùnt’ù]; English: /o’buntu : / oo-BOON-too) is an ethic or humanist philosophy focusing on] people’s allegiances and relations with each other. The word has its origin in the Bantu languages of southern Africa. Ubuntu is seen as a classical African concept. Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)#cite_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy)#cite_note-0)

Bantu philosophy based on belief that a human being is defined as true human being only by other members of the society. Therefore being in solidarity with others is an affirmation of one's identity as true human being. "I am because you are and you are because I am". Cultivating such level of togetherness and appreciation at deeper human level is a crucial asset for resilience. Unfortunately in many corners of Africa, leaders are yet to translate this philosophy into governance systems centered on common good.

II. A digression: Two warnings: 1) Illusion of institutional strength; 2) Social cohesion is not a spontaneous generation.

When disasters such as violent conflicts erupt, it exposes the often unsuspected weaknesses of a system widely considered as strong and fully in control. Africa is currently witnessing dramatic moments of its history. No one would fail to observe, not without amazement, the socio-political earthquakes and tsunamis that are swiping Northern Africa with strong reverberations throughout the middle-east and beyond. The fall of "strong regimes" such as that of Tunisia and Egypt is a strong reminder of the myopic belief that only so-called strong institutions constitute the sole guarantee of stability and peace. A false assumption considers that strong institutions hereby understood as multiplication of security apparatus: strong army, police, security system, as indispensable for durably maintaining peace and stability in the society. These means of coercion, which are the monopoly of every State, are just necessary but not sufficient instruments of maintaining sustainable stability and security in a country. To be effective, these institutions must emanate from and trusted by the people they serve. But when they are gangrened with corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, inefficiency in service delivery, etc. they lose legitimacy as people just fear them. They look strong. But their real strength becomes illusionary.

Who would have imagined that President Mubarak of Egypt or Colonel Gaddafi of Libya would be challenged and just, within days, their regimes collapse? All these regimes were governed by institutions that "appeared" to be very strong, especially to the outside world. It is my opinion that the strength of institutions should not be defined by a display of military might or omnipresence of security machinery that tightly control people's movements and suffocate their legitimate aspirations to freedom. Strong institutions must be defined by their ability to efficiently respond to people's aspirations in a transparent, participatory and accountable manner. The popular protest in northern Africa, brought to a bright light these regimes' inability to properly mediate and adequately respond to legitimate demands of their citizens. This failure exposed their weaknesses. The inventors of "face book" or "twitter" probably never suspected that the creation of these social networks would ever lead to liberating popular uprisings. People have now discovered alternative channels of free expression. People have regained their power! Such social networks help in building relational social capital by linking people, sharing information and creating a virtual community of people who share a common vision. They also help create some forms of resilient communities that can withstand repression and mobilize resistance.

Also, the building of social bonds will never come from an unexpected social mutation or a spontaneous generation. Creating social bonds will require a conscientious and deliberate process to profoundly transform the society's belief systems and the building of a new worldview such as for example, "shifting from strict individually focused needs to those of the population as a whole". (Burkle p.13). Discovering

one another as a member of “not only as a society of good citizens but also one of good neighbors...” (4 blog4), invites the society to reassess its benchmarks of humanity. The process of building a community of not only good citizens but also good neighbors must be deliberate. It might require developing bold programs focused good neighborliness, policies that foster reconciliation, processes of humanization of relationships, research on best practices in the promotion social capital (e.g. role models), and allocation of consequential resources to these processes. The promotion of social cohesion must be embedded to the overall strategy of vulnerability reduction and the increased resilience strategy response to disasters. People need learn to love one another anew.

Eliane Ubalijoro’s personal experience is full of moving stories of true “heroes”. Heroes are those who, in the midst of total breakdown of the law, moral and ethical values, go beyond fears and sectarian convictions, courageously defy the logic of the moment to save lives. The heroes are exceptional people who rise above emotions and hysterical ethnocentric “blind trust” to protect and save the lives of those perceived as enemies! These are live monuments of true humanism. They should become the society’s role model. Promoting such heroes, including creating opportunity for them to play leadership role at different levels in the society would certainly assist the society to recover and increase its resilience to future calamities.

III. Conclusion:

The community will be less vulnerable and develop strong resilience when strong governing institutions and systems are combined with strong social cohesion. The community will have high vulnerability and very low resilience when the governing institutions and systems are weak and community experience lose social cohesion. However, the community will remain potentially vulnerable and partially resilient when it enjoys strong institutions but low social cohesion. In the same way, the community will remain potentially vulnerable partially resilient when governing institutions and systems are weak but social cohesion is strong.

Therefore, one could even conclude that adequate conflict or disaster preparedness require both the visibility of tangibles (institutions and systems) and the intangibles (social capital). A good dosage of both will guarantee greater resilience of the community in times of shocks and crises.