IJC&R

The International Journal of Conflict & Reconciliation
Spring 2025, Vol. 5, No. 1

The Acceptance in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Understanding the Action-Based Reconciliation Model Between the Former Genocide Prisoners and Genocide Survivors, Living in Reconciliation Villages

Felix Bigabo[1]
Kampala University

Abstract

The study explores the meanings both former genocide survivors and perpetrators give to living side by side within an action-based reconciliation model and its contribution to social cohesion and sustainable peace. The research was conducted from September to December 2022, in two reconciliation villages initiated by Prison Fellowship Rwanda. Qualitative research methods, including focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth individual interviews, were utilized to collect data. The study included 72 participants living in two reconciliation villages, Kimonyi and Kabarondo. The findings reveal that living together in reconciliation villages gradually increases acceptance and trust through continuous interaction and joint activities. Reconciliation is a transformative journey rather than an immediate outcome. Participants reported that shared labor played a crucial role in bridging gaps and fostering mutual understanding and acceptance. The research indicates that reconciliation is significantly enhanced by consistent, cooperative activity and that genuine reconciliation involves both symbolic and practical dimensions. Challenges noted include communication barriers, limited opportunities for youth, and the need for ongoing psychological support and conflict resolution mechanisms. Recommendations include increasing community dialogue, creating youth engagement programs, and establishing advisory committees to address conflicts as well as support reconciliation efforts. An action-based reconciliation model contributes to reducing dehumanization, restoring dignity, and fostering positive social identity among victims and perpetrators. It demonstrates that sustained interaction and cooperation are essential for achieving long-term social cohesion and acceptance. Future research should focus on comparative studies of early versus recent arrivals in reconciliation villages and explore empowerment factors in reconciliation processes.

Keywords: action-based reconciliation model, reconciliation village, genocide, acceptance

1. Background

Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR) is a faith-based organization and a member of Prison Fellowship International, created in 1995. As a vision, Prison Fellowship Rwanda hopes for a society where

Unity, Peace, Justice, and Inclusive development reign. Since 2003, PFR activities have expanded beyond correction facilities into communities. PFR implements programs on peacebuilding and unity within communities, promotes access to justice and protection for people in need, and provides psychosocial support, spiritual resilience, and livelihood assistance to low-income people. PFR uses different approaches in the implementation of its programs including community-based socio-therapy[2], multifamily therapy[3], a sycamore tree approach[4], collaborative livelihood[5], and the action-based reconciliation model[6].

An action-based reconciliation model through reconciliation villages, as used by Prison Fellowship Rwanda was initiated 2003, focusing on instilling action-based practical reconciliation between the perpetrators and genocide survivors. The model uses different collaborative livelihood activities including farming, livestock, skills development, and economic empowerment in cooperative projects, joint participation in community events, and cultural initiatives.

More than two decades ago, Rwanda experienced the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi that culminated in the deaths of more than one million Tutsi. Over 120,0007 people were jailed for genocide-related crimes. According to the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS)[8] , 33,487 inmates will be released between 2023 and 2027, including genocide inmates. In Rwanda, remarkable efforts were made over the past several decades to improve the well-being of convicts, including the implementation of numerous rehabilitation and reintegration programs. However, challenges regarding their reintegration persist including the psychosocial preparation of soon-to-be-released inmates and their reintegration into communities. The emphasis is on long-term correctional services and successful reintegration upon release. Pre-release reintegration, also known as 'custodian reintegration,' was initiated by a variety of actors (state and non-state). The Prison Fellowship Rwanda, a nongovernment organization, has been working with prisoners and community members since its inception to engage in and foster reconciliation and reintegration activities.

The primary objective of social reintegration programs is to provide an offender with the assistance and supervision each needs to lead a crime-free live and avoid reoffending. The purpose is to help offenders desist from crime, successfully reintegrate into the community, and prevent a relapse into crime (UNODC, 2012). The process involves conflict resolution programs between adversarial parties to restore trust and build a pragmatic partnership in which each side is convinced that cooperation is in his or her best interest (Schnabel et al., 2008). On the other hand, limited rehabilitation can hinder the forgiveness between offenders and victims. Reconciliation is "a willingness to come together to work, play, or live in an atmosphere of trust (J.J.,& Baumeister, 2000).

Prison Fellowship Rwanda started the reconciliation villages to promote practical reconciliation between genocide perpetrators and survivors and facilitate the reintegration process. The organization runs eight reconciliation villages across the country that accommodate 4080 people from the families of released perpetrators and survivors, new returnees, and vulnerable members of the communities. In the eastern province, there are seven reconciliation villages with 655 houses, in the northern province, there is one reconciliation village with 189 houses. There is

a difference in terms of size depending on the number of families each village accommodates. These villages were constructed from 2003 to 2012. In the eastern province, 63% of the heads of families in the villages are men, and 37% are women. In the northern province, 53 % of the heads of families are men, whereas 47% are women. Most of the female heads of households are widows.

Beneficiaries were selected by local authorities in partnership with Prison Fellowship Rwanda. They willingly took part in the project and participated in the community healing and reconciliation process before being accommodated in reconciliation villages. The benefits of participating in this project are multiple, but the major one is finding a favorable environment for healing and reconciliation. Since its inception, the action-based reconciliation model has attracted the interest of national and international peace actors and is recognized as a homegrown solution to reconciliation and peacebuilding. However, there is still a need for scientific evidence on the benefits of this reconciliation model. No scientific research has yet been conducted that documents the experience of genocide survivors and perpetrators living side by side or that discusses the successes, and the challenges of the reconciliation villages.

The theoretical framework under which this research is situated includes the intergroup contact hypothesis by Allport (1954), who suggested that positive effects of intergroup contact occur in contact situations characterized by four key conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. In addition, the Robbers Cave experiment conducted by Muzafer Sherif in the 1950s, reveals that cooperative tasks reduce conflict between opponent groups, and highlights the role of shared goals in resolving group tensions.

The historical background provided above led us to conduct this research. The main objective of this study was to explore the mutual acceptance of each other among genocide prisoners and genocide survivors, to understand the meaning that each group gives to the experience of living together in the action-based reconciliation model, and to see how this approach contributes to social cohesion and sustainable peace. The research was carried out in two reconciliation villages; one located in the northern province and another in the eastern province of Rwanda. The research was conducted from September to December 2022.

The main research questions were the following:

- How do genocide survivors and perpetrators experience and interpret living together in the same reconciliation villages?
- What issues are they faced with from the reconciliation perspective?
- What lessons and policy recommendations can be drawn from the experience of reconciliation villages in Rwanda?

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in two of eight reconciliation villages: Kimonyi in the northern province and Kabarondo in the eastern province. These villages were selected based on their

diversities in terms of location, and their duration difference; Kimonyi village was built in 2003 and Kabarondo village was built in 2012.

The qualitative approach was used to understand the experiences of the convicted perpetrators and genocide survivors, and the meanings they gave to their everyday life together. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants. The age range was between 45 and 65 among the male and female participants and all were heads of families. The research techniques included six FGDs: Two FGDs with genocide survivors alone, two with genocide perpetrators and current prisoners, and two with mixed groups from each of the four mentioned categories. Each FGD was composed of 8 to10 participants. In total 58 people participated in the six FGDs. In-depth Individual Interviews (IDI) were also conducted. These included three former genocide prisoners, three genocide survivors, four local leaders, and four youths from the families of genocide survivors and ex-prisoners. In total, 14 people participated in the in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted by research assistants and transcribed into the local language (Kinyarwanda) and were translated into English. Transcriptions were done verbatim, and the thematic analysis of the data was done.

3. Research findings

3.1. Acceptance, forgiveness and trust

The goal to end conflicts between adversaries should address emotional issues such as mutual respect, acceptance, compassion, and justice. Failing to do so will leave any agreements distinctly fragile (Kohen et al., 2011). Also, permanent contact between offenders and victims facilitates the forgiveness process. Living together should increase trust, reduce feelings of suspicion and create friendship between the hostile groups. This study's findings support the benefit of contact. Intergroup contact theory stands as one of socio-psychology's foremost strategies used in transforming interpersonal relations by reducing negative-dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors, such as prejudice, negative stereotyping, or discrimination, while fostering humanizing behavior between adversaries (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Miller, 2002). To forgive in this way is to resist the power of the past to determine the possibilities of the present (Schaap, 2003). Any reconciliation process that helps both offenders and victims to overcome the pain of the past, and ongoing mistrust could generate effective forgiveness.

The research findings corroborate the above theories. Our focus group discussions and IDI with ex-genocide prisoners and genocide survivors revealed important similarities and differences in their attitudes regarding acceptance, forgiveness and trust. It also highlighted the significance of time spent in the reconciliation villages.

Most participants from both survivors and prisoners said that it is worth living together in these reconciliation villages, as opposed to living separately. The experience allowed them to reconnect, and the constant contact helped them overcome feelings of suspicion and mistrust. This enhanced the growth of good neighborhoods and reinforced social cohesion. Before this, they

never imagined that co-habitation between victims and perpetrators could ever be possible. As one male genocide survivor from Kimonyi village said:

> If we had continued to live alone, we would not know the meaning of unity, we would not be able to reconcile with the perpetrators, and we would always perceive them as killers and this would exacerbate our depression, and in case of encountering problems in our daily lives, we, the victims, would then rely only on each other, but today we help each other as victims and perpetrators.

3.2. Lack of trust in the early stage of living together

The research findings revealed that those involved in the earlier rounds of arrival in the villages show stronger acceptance than later arrivals. The latter reported that though they were welcomed in the villages, compared to those who had arrived earlier, they still had a long way to go to feel comfortable participating in reconciliation activities and programs. Those who arrived later reported that they still had many things to learn about living together. Some of them were still mistrustful and didn't understand how they could become effective participants in the context of this new action-based reconciliation model. However, as long as there is interaction between opponent groups, apologies and forgiveness can continue to be the basis of trust among them. Apologies considerably increase trust, particularly through interpersonal interaction (Christopher P, and All, 2020). One male ex-prisoner from Kabarondo village noted:

> As long as I meet and talk to genocide survivors, I feel an increase of confidence to be and walk with them, despite my feeling of fear and shame. Even if I still have a long journey, I hope that the fact of living in a reconciliation village will enable us to fully restore and renew our relationship as Rwandans.

These findings emphasize the importance of considering reconciliation as a journey, not an event.

3.3. Reconciliation and forgiveness over time

The face-to-face interaction between hostile groups can increase trust and reduce animosity. Inter-group cooperation can lead to meaningful relationships. Reconciliation as a process, contributes to a change of heart, in ways that drive people towards a deeper level of contact (Clements & Lee, 2020; Gaertner, 2011). Regarding their experience of living together, most of the adult participants reported that before they came to the village, they were unable to communicate freely with members of the opposing group, now they talked and laughed freely. As a sign of trust, if someone goes out, she can leave her children with her neighbor without being worried. In general, they say that they are doing well, and that their experience can be described as a social learning process. One of the male survivors in Kabarondo village confirmed this:

> The ex-prisoners were always afraid of us anytime we came across one of them, they would show fear, but today when we meet, we greet each other and talk freely.

In the same context, one of the local leaders emphasized the importance of living in these villages. Another believed that:

> Teaching is a process. For instance, inhabitants of reconciliation villages have a club of unity that brings them together, and this helps increase the level of trust and safety. There, they learn different things related to unity and reconciliation, development, and Rwandan cultural values.

This particular individual gave an example from one of the clubs: Its leader is from a family of genocide survivors, while the songwriter is from a family of an ex-prisoner. Further, most genocide survivors said that through the action-based reconciliation model, they discovered the value and the power of forgiveness. One of them commented:

> The first thing I am pleased with is that I was able to forgive. When you forgive you feel relieved and safe in your heart, when you are not yet able to do so, you cannot feel disentangled because you are still tied in your heart.

The meaning given to the action-based reconciliation model was also analyzed**.** Reconciliation villages offered inhabitants the opportunity to communicate. This reduced prejudice and fear and generated trust in the community. Benefits also accrue to the offenders, especially in confronting the harm they caused and accepting responsibility for their actions. Further, since they are real participants rather than bystanders, they too can experience empowerment (Zehr, 2010). To forgive in this way is to resist the power of the past to determine the possibilities of the present (Schaap, 2003). Any reconciliation process that helps both offenders and victims overcome the pain and mistrust of the past can effectively generate forgiveness. Overall, the results from the FGDs indicate that both ex-prisoners and genocide survivors strongly valued these villages. One of the survivors in Kimonyi village said:

> The reconciliation village means the restoration of dignity; we got houses, and some of us even got Girinka[9], our children play together, we parents meet and talk to each other as well, and we all fight against genocide ideologies.

From this respondent's perspective, reconciliation processes can offer individuals a sense of renewal and a restored sense of humanity, especially for those who have experienced severe trauma or perpetrated violence. In other words, this indicates that action-based reconciliation models can help individuals regain their sense of identity and dignity, eroded by their past actions

or experiences. This corroborates our other findings that apologies and forgiveness, by satisfying people's needs, facilitate reconciliation. The entire process restores lost dignity, as the victim's sense of agency and the perpetrator's moral image are renewed (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015).

Another male ex-prisoner in Kayonza village argued that:

> Action-based reconciliation is about restoring trust between us, restoring peace for all, understanding that each of us is a Rwandan, that we are all the same, and therefore, helping each other.

From these views, reconciliation villages offered opportunities for action-based reconciliation, learning about unity reconciliation, and forgiveness in a practical way. The participants highlighted that the village is a school for them. One genocide survivor in Kimonyi village clearly expressed this:

> The Reconciliation Village is a good school, because if we were still living separately, we would not have had the opportunity to build trust between us and ex-genocide prisoners. Now, each of us is a mirror to others (mirroring a shared trust) and we are happy that we have built strong unity. We opened up to each other and each of us broke the ties that were entangling him. If the thing that was entangling you is broken, what follows is development, because if you were entangled and you become disentangled, there is development, because you are empowered.

Integrated settings, where individuals from different backgrounds interact regularly, can be instrumental in fostering reconciliation. For the ex-prisoners the import of this program included the fact that it allowed them to reconnect with people they offended (genocide survivors) and is a restorative platform that enlightened their hearts. Through it, they were able to disclose and reveal what was hidden in their hearts, particularly the genocide crimes they committed. After their release from prison, they feared revenge from genocide survivors, but they were surprised by the welcome received from the former victims. In this context, collective efficacy should be seen as a confluence of networks, values, and norms of reciprocity that enable individuals and communities to suppress deviant behavior and maintain social order (Brunton-Smith I, Sturgis P, Leckie G, 2018).

The accounts above highlight the transformative potential of action-based reconciliation models. They illustrate how such models can lead to personal healing, reduced dehumanization, improved intergroup relations through shared labor, and strong unity. These findings align with and help extend existing research, suggesting that practical, action-oriented reconciliation efforts can significantly impact individuals and communities affected by conflict and violence. The significance of working together and enjoying the outcome cannot be overemphasized. This practical approach to reconciliation not only fosters unity but also builds mutual trust and respect. The act of working side-by-side serves to bridge gaps between individuals from different

backgrounds, promoting a sense of community and shared purpose. The potential role of cooperatives and other self-help groups in terms of capacity building among the affected population can also facilitate local ownership and sustainability, alleviating poverty, and promoting social dialog (Parnell E, 2001).

One male ex-prisoner summarized his experience with the action-based program in this way:

> For me life through an action-based reconciliation model means coming from deep darkness to light. Being here in a reconciliation village means light compared to where I came from. I feel like a human being again.

Another ex-prisoner noted:

> The meaning I can make of the action-based reconciliation model is reconciliatory; it enabled us to reconnect again, live and work together, and share the income from common labor. For example, like me who was imprisoned and sentenced for a long time, I apologized, and genocide survivors forgave me. This is an indication of strong unity.

On the problem of justice, studies have indicated that restorative justice programs are experienced as less stigmatizing and judgmental than traditional retributive justice procedures (Shapland et al., 2008; Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016). In general, the ex-prisoners in the present study expressed satisfaction with joint projects. For instances, one person argued that "working together with a common goal enhances the feeling of togetherness and unity." An action-based reconciliation model in the context of restorative justice, contributes to relieving stress for both offenders and victims. Our research participants also emphasized the impact the project had on stemming further deviant behavior among perpetrators. If nothing is done to neutralize deviant behavior, then an individual may develop a 'deviant identity' with concomitant feelings of self-rejection; neutralization is therefore essential (Anderson, 2017). Ex-prisoners spoke about the benefits of being welcomed and integrated into communities. For instance, one noted that:

> At first, it was not easy when I was going to go out from my home, I feared to meet and see those I had offended, seeing them was a reflection of the crimes I committed, but the way they showed me tenderness, despite who I am, helped me to gradually come out of my self-stigmatization, and feel at ease among others.

On the other side, genocide survivors, told us that they learned a lot from those survivors who had lived in the villages for a long time. This helped improve their interaction with genocide perpetrators, as they embarked on the action-based reconciliation process. However, the research findings revealed that the length of time both perpetrators and survivors spent in the villages made

a difference. Newcomers still had many issues to iron out compared to longstanding village residents.

Ex-prisoners who have spent many years in reconciliation villages, mostly described their journey as "a spring-cleaning of their hearts" due to the continuous contact they had with those survivors who were neighbors. One man from Kimonyi village said

> Being reunited in the same reconciliation village and being provided with shelter as a genocide perpetrator close to survivors, made me happier. In addition, there was no revenge, we were able to disclose things close to our hearts about what we did, and this was taken into consideration by the victims who forgave us. My gratitude to those who initiated this action–based reconciliation program.

Indeed, most perpetrators noted that survivors generally did not keep them at a distance but responded well to them. They therefore believed that their forgiveness was genuine. Participants felt that the growth of neighborhood collective efficacy lowered the risk of hate crimes. Collective efficacy can be viewed as combining social solidarity with a willingness to intervene on behalf of one another. Sampson et al., (1997) found that collective efficacy was associated with reduced violence. Several of the perpetrators emphasized that survivors no longer appeared to be afraid of them as one would be afraid of a criminal. For example, one of the most recent residents of Kimonyi said:

> What makes me happy since I started living in the reconciliation village, is the fact that my neighbors show me that we are together, and no genocide survivor fears me because of what I did or indicates that he /she hates me.

Having different needs satisfied increases each group's willingness to reconcile with the other (Shnabel et al.,2008). Findings from the joint (perpetrators and survivors) focus group discussions revealed the role of an apology in the victim's need for empowerment. They were also able to learn the truth about the crimes committed against them or their relatives. Perpetrators, on the other hand, had a great need for acceptance, assurance that their victims or other members of the moral community do not reject them. Another important finding is the way in which the action-based reconciliation model generated a balanced relationship between offenders and victims. In their daily lives, they believed each other to be equal in terms of rights and social identity. One of the survivors in Kabarondo village put it this way:

> This action-based reconciliation model helped us become the same. Generally, you are told by those who have not been through the reconciliation model, or lived closely together, that you are different; this experience is, itself, an education.

In other words, genocide survivors reported feeling empowered, and ex-genocide prisoners who were suffering from isolation, reported feeling accepted in their communities.

Reconciliation can be understood as a meeting place between peace, truth, mercy, and justice with an envisioned future that thrives on interdependence (Lederach, 1997). One female genocide survivor from Kabarondo village elaborated on her experience:

> After the plane crash of the former President of Rwanda, we started hearing gun. However, we were already targets because the Tutsi were accused of being spies for the rebel group, Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). After the death of former president HABYARIMANA, we saw ordinary people bearing machetes, and guns, saying that they were hunting down Tutsi. My family and I fled from home and went to hide in a priest's house where we thought we could be safe, but it was in vain because the killers swarmed the place. I was separated from my husband and later learned that they had killed him near the Catholic church. We spent many days hiding in different places. I covered my face with mud to hide, and when they saw me there, they thought I was a crazy woman, and they left me alone. Finally, we were saved by the arrival of (RPF) soldiers, who liberated us from the hands of genocidaires. Before my life in the reconciliation village, I could not imagine that it would be possible to live with ex-genocide prisoners as my close neighbors, but throughout the action-based reconciliation journey, I realized that accepting them as human beings with whom one can cohabit is needed, and particularly after hearing the confessions and apologies from some of them.

In a reconciliation village, people live in harmony and without suspicion. For example, one man noted that*:*

> If one of us opens a bar, we go there and share a drink regardless of who he is. And if one of us has a problem, we help him without distinction. In addition, we are happy that our children get milk from cows that were given by the government through the GIRINKA program.

This program, also known as a "Cow per Poor Household", was inspired by the Rwandan culture and initiated by the President of the Republic of Rwanda in 2006 and was then implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources (MINAGRI) in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC). The inspiration for the program came from the Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey II conducted in 2005 by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR). It revealed that the rate of rural poverty was substantial at 62.5% and the rate of childhood malnutrition extremely alarming (NISR, 2005).

3.4. Reconciliation through everyday practices (labor, school, church, marriage, associations)

In general, the participants emphasized the importance of common labor, activities done by both ex-prisoners and genocide survivors. Those activities are improving their livelihood conditions, while also enhancing their unity. Like reconciliation, a genuine apology is a process, rather than the single action of saying "I'm sorry" and expecting progress. An apology is a delicate sequence of events between people. Apologetic acts are interactive because the offender must elicit forgiveness from the offended. There must be a valued bond between the offender and the offended to achieve a true apology and evoke feelings of forgiveness that transform emotion and restore the bond (Tavuchis, 1991). Rhetoric reconciliation emphasizes the importance of reaching accommodation with conflicting people and consensus building. The opening dialogue primarily requires self-definition, demarcating boundaries, and the language of empathy to reduce the degree of defensiveness in reaching an agreement and unity (Barbara Sobczak, 2013).

An action-based reconciliation model is a platform that allows movement from theory to practice by addressing issues related to reconciliation while strengthening joint initiatives for their socioeconomic development. An action-based reconciliation model consists of bringing together the opponent groups to work together for a common goal. One former prisoner noted that: "Action-based reconciliation is to reconcile with someone you offended, through unifying activities which allow both sides to share or enjoy good times without suspicion and mistrust."

In addition, genocide survivors were open and eager to work with perpetrators and even support some of them who no longer had the physical ability to work, especially old people. This kind of collaboration has contributed to reducing negative thoughts, and attitudes, and to cementing relationships between families. Therefore, action-based reconciliation is a unifying environment where both victims and offenders engage in common activities that bring them together. Here reconciliation is not merely focused on words but generated through action. It was revealed that the rhetoric of apology and forgiveness themselves were perceived by some genocide survivors and perpetrators as dealing only with aspects of emotional forgiveness. Additional steps are required to build mutual trust between hostile groups. Reconciliation through activities and interaction overcome the limitations of verbal exchange as a medium of reconciliation.

Different reactions were also recorded regarding joint activities. One survivor said:

> When I decided to farm alongside the released genocide perpetrators, I was still fearful remembering how they killed people. However, as I continued working closely with them, and getting support from them, my feelings of suspicion disappeared, and trust was restored within me.

A former prisoner in Kimonyi village noted that:

> Before joining and participate in common activities with genocide survivors, I wondered how I would be perceived by genocide survivors, and what I would do to show them that I am no longer a killer. But as we worked together in a cooperative, we reached the point

where we could freely discuss what could be done to increase the income and improve our livelihood. This helped me feel confident as a member of the group.

3.5. Successes throughout life in reconciliation villages

Clearly, victims and their loved ones have a deep desire for answers and, more often than not, criminal trials cannot address this: 'They need real information, not speculation or the legally constrained information that comes from a trial or plea agreement' (Zehr, 2002, p. 14). From this perspective, genocide perpetrators could be depicted as inhuman, based on the atrocities they committed. Moral injury underlies the feelings of guilt and shame; harming others can result in distress which is often exacerbated by law enforcement vis-à-vis the crime that has been committed (Papazoglou & Chopko, 2017).

All victims of atrocities and violence are stripped of their dignity and feel dehumanized and degraded (Kaufmann, Kuch & Neuhauser, 2011). Some of the genocide survivors expressed these feelings. They noted that while they feel like other Rwandans today, they did not feel like that in the past, since they had been depicted as insects. Now they realize that all Rwandans are equal and are proud of being Rwandan. This research shows that a process of re-humanization is taking place following the long period of dehumanization that these victims experienced as targets of mass killings and atrocities. Nonetheless, the situation is still evolving. There is a feeling of being stigmatized, and some participants complain about the verbal attacks from some residents, particularly from the more recent arrivals.

Genocide perpetrators are often described as monsters or animals, given the types of the atrocities they committed. This tends to exacerbate their feelings of self-dehumanization. Killing without consequences[10] (moral neutralization) is not acceptable within the Rwandan culture. This is particularly true regarding the act of killing for which there was a strong prohibition before the genocide. As the saying goes, *"kwica kirazira"* (killing is taboo) and *ishyano* (an abominable act). This taboo maintains that "blood spilled in violence" or "bad death" can inflict extreme mental or physical illness on the perpetrator and anyone else who comes in contact with the deed.

The wounded genocide survivors, if not healed, can continue to perceive genocide perpetrators simply as killers, who would kill again, and again. One of the survivors in Kimonyi village said:

> I am happy to live with people in practical ways. I am thankful because this is where I came from, and where I am now. Before this I didn't want to talk to those who had committed genocide. I hated them and even resented their children. But today I thank God and the government of Rwanda. I now see them as human beings, like me. In addition, we all meet during our activities for the common goal of developing ourselves and the Rwanda community. Today, there is no Rwandan who judges others based on physical appearance alone.

The findings from individual interviews with youth from families of both groups also revealed that life in the villages has had an impact on the younger generation. There is a high level of trust and cooperation among the residents. In general, the youth realize that despite the painful past experience of their parents, these villages are not only an arena for developing good neighborhoods, but also a place where the youth can learn about the history of violence and genocide, as well as about the journey of reconciliation. One young girl from a family of survivors in Kabarondo village said that:

> The action-based reconciliation journey is moving along nicely. It is successful because people trust each other. It is a source of pride for the country. As young people we also interact well regardless of which type of family we come from. I see that our parents have reconciled when they meet, they talk, and they visit each other and help each other in their daily activities. Consequently, it has helped us become friends also.

These viewpoints from the youth support our other research findings that reconciliation works when fragmented relationships are brought together within a specific social context where the victim and oppressor not only live together away from violence and without malice, but in trust and friendship (Gaertner, 2011). By discovering things and learning from their parents, the lives and relationships of the younger generation are shaped by the changes they see in their parents. One testimony of a young respondent from the family of an ex-prisoner, Kimonyi village went like this:

> I can't see a genocide survivor, who is old and who needs help in getting firewood for the kitchen, for example, and not helping him or her because he /she is a survivor. I would help him or her with joy and enthusiasm. I find it interesting, and I believe that as youths, we need to work together to foster peace and job creation, even if it is not easy. The future is bright.

The inter-generational transmission of the effects of atrocities has also been revealed in another study on the longitudinal impact on parents and grandparents, (Tangney & Dearing's, 2004). The study stressed the risk of developing shame across the lifespan. Similarly, in the present study, some of the children of ex-prisoners said that they still felt ashamed of what their parents had done, and they repeated, again and again, their commitment to fighting against genocide in the future.

Findings from interviews with local leaders also emphasized the uniqueness of the reconciliation villages, particularly, the development of the action-based reconciliation model. The model was seen as reflecting togetherness and post-traumatic growth. In addition, local leaders noted, specifically, that reconciliation villages promote community reintegration among ex-prisoners. The experience allowed them to gradually feel that they were being reintegrated into their families and communities. After receiving forgiveness, the offender can be reintegrated into

society, reflecting the restoration relationships to a functioning level (Mu & Bobocel, 2019; Tavuchis, 1991). One of the leaders in Kabarondo village summed it up: "The fact that we can safely sleep in our own houses without fear and suspicion, the fact that we work together as victims and offenders with joy, and the fact that we share meals on the same plate without disgust, is amazing and a sign of unity."

The participants also talked about mutual help and support. For example, as per Rwandan tradition, if one of the residents of a reconciliation village was planning a wedding for his son or her daughter, all have the moral obligation to attend the wedding ceremony and contribute in money or kind. Forgiveness is an interpersonal outcome, and a goal, that allows victims and transgressors to communicate their desire to reconcile and, in some cases, live and work among each other (Mitchell, 2014). One of leaders noted the following: the action-based reconciliation model revealed that the most significant issue for genocide survivors is to see ex-offenders express, from the bottom of their hearts, sincere apologies for the crimes they committed. In this way, the sincere confessions of offenders and their acknowledgment of the victim's suffering generate genuine forgiveness. In addition, it allows the victim to undergo an intrapsychic process that releases negative thoughts and emotions and increases empathy for the offender. This in turn facilitates the ability to forgive (Mu & Bobocel, 2019).

3.6. The limitations of the action-based reconciliation model

Despite the successes reported above, the research participants alluded to several challenges. One important problem, as noted earlier, was the continued poor communication and verbal attacks among some residents. Another complaint was that there was no program that allowed the youth to work together like their parents. They lacked organized joint work programs which would not only enhance togetherness, but could also create opportunities for jobs, and socio-economic development. Even if most of the youth report adjusting well to life in reconciliation villages, some from the families of ex-prisoners said that they still feel ashamed of what their parents did.

Another important problem mentioned by the research participants was the lack of continued follow-up dialogues organized by Prison Fellowship Rwanda or other local stakeholders. As healing and reconciliation is a process, dialogue sessions could be increased, particularly targeting the newly reintegrated people (both genocide survivors and ex-genocide prisoners).

The issue of age was also brought up. Most perpetrators and survivors are getting old and are having trouble taking care of themselves or working on their farms. This affects the individual's economic wellbeing and also reduces their contributions to the community. Finally, the participants noted that there is a need for an advisory and conflict resolution committee in each village. Some of the research participants pointed out that not all conflicts within the villages were related to the genocide issue. Some arose as a result of daily interaction and or the deviant behavior of some residents. The villages therefore needed to establish formal committees to deal with these problems.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the dynamics of acceptance, forgiveness, and trust in post-genocide Rwanda, focusing on the action-based reconciliation model implemented in reconciliation villages. The findings reveal a nuanced picture of how genocide survivors and former genocide prisoners experience and interpret living together, the challenges they face, and the implications for reconciliation processes.

The results underscore the critical role of emotional and psychological dimensions in reconciliation. The theory of intergroup contact, which suggests that sustained interaction can reduce prejudice and foster trust, is supported by the findings. Both genocide survivors and ex-prisoners reported increased trust and reduced suspicion following continuous contact and cohabitation. This aligns with previous research indicating that contact between adversaries can diminish negative stereotypes and foster forgiveness. Following long-term interaction, people tend to have less bias and animosity towards each other compared to those with less contact (Burke et al., 2017; Dovidio et al., 2017; Miller, 2002; van Ryn et al., 2015). It is important to emphasize that the action-based reconciliation model does not result in instantaneous change but allows participants to experience a transformative journey (Lederach 1997).

Participants themselves highlighted the importance of both the symbolic and practical dimensions of interacting. Working together and participating in communal activities helped bridge gaps between former adversaries, underscoring the effectiveness of action-based reconciliation in addressing emotional wounds and fostering a sense of shared identity as noted by Mafeza (2013). While working together, a bottom-up process of healing occurs and the emotional needs (acceptance and empowerment) of each group are addressed. The testimonies of the villagers indicate that open dialogue and mutual understanding go a long way in restoring dignity, building trust and developing a sense of community. Further, in describing the reconciliation village as a school, participants indicated that this type of integrated setting can be an instrument for fostering self-disclosure and inducing trust (Ditlmann & Samii, 2026). Some participants used the imagery of mirrors in the process of peacebuilding, as in “each of us is a mirror to others”. This indicates a profound understanding of the impact of mutual influence and empathy, that personal growth and community cohesion are achieved through understanding and relating to one another’s experiences. They realized that personal growth, community empowerment and developing common goals can arise from participating in daily activities.

Thus, working together, attending schools, and participating in communal activities, integrate individuals into a common social framework that encourages cooperation and unity, crucial for reconciliation. The action-based reconciliation model effectively transforms theoretical concepts into practical realities (West & Dovidio, 2013). As shown by the present study, genuine reconciliation goes beyond verbal apologies or formal gestures. Reconciliation is significantly enhanced by consistent, cooperative action: “Action speaks louder than words”. Nonetheless, challenges remain, particularly among the youth, new arrivals, as discussed earlier. Interpersonal

conflicts that have nothing to do with the genocide also need attention. There is therefore the need for follow-up studies by Prison Fellowship Rwanda.

Conclusion

The research findings support the idea that one important strategy for restoring relationships between hostile groups is the construction of a bottom-up practical program to promote acceptance and restore trust within a population. The action-based reconciliation model is such a strategy. It serves to reduce the dehumanization of others and restores positive social identities for both perpetrators and victims. Working together and learning to bond cannot be overemphasized.

Nonetheless, certain recommendations can be made based on both the complaints and suggestions of the villagers. There is the need to organize additional training/community dialogues on healing and reconciliation, with an emphasis on effective interpersonal communication among residents. There is also a need to initiate joint work programs among the younger generation along the lines that exist for their parents. Intergenerational dialogues will be necessary to keep alive the positive dimensions of reconciliation and reduce problems. One problem that is on the horizon is the need for practical and social support for villagers as they age.

Additional research is recommended, including comparative research on the level of acceptance and social cohesion between early and new arrivals in reconciliation villages. Further research should explore the factors that help us understand the mechanisms that support individual and collective growth. There is still much to be done to understand what assists in stimulating acceptance, empowerment and forgiving throughout the peace-building process.

Finally, this experimental model of reconciliation can be used as a springboard for handling the aftermath of conflicts in other locations. Several of the participants noted that people have come from other parts of Rwanda as well from other countries to observe life in the villages. The participants believe that these visits help to restore their dignity and humanity. Interest in this model gives them credibility, since others come to learn from them despite their shameful and dark past. Governments and private organizations in the USA, India, South Sudan and the Central African Republic have sought advice on the reconciliation process and even learn professional skills. The villagers have begun to see themselves as pioneers in a model of peace building from which others, both within and outside of Africa, can build on.

Acronyms

FGD: Focus Group Discussions
IDI: In-depth Individual Interviews
PFR: Prison Fellowship Rwanda

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) for its financial and technical support, which made this research possible. Its commitment to advancing scientific knowledge has been invaluable to the successful completion of this study. I also wish to thank Prison Fellowship Rwanda for having initiated reconciliation villages in post-genocide Rwanda, which have become a model for good practices in peacebuilding endeavors. My gratitude also goes to the research participants for their time and willingness to share their experiences which greatly facilitated my work and contributed significantly to the research findings. Lastly, I appreciate the efforts of all individuals and organizations involved in supporting this project. Without their contributions, this research would not have been possible.

Notes

[1] Master degree holder in Psychology, PhD candidate in Peace and conflict studies at Kampala University (KU), Peace building practioner with long experience in restorative justice, community healing , reconciliation and social cohesion in post conflict societies. This research has been conducted under partnership and financial support from The African Peacebuiding Network (APN).

[2] Sociotherapy is a psychosocial healing and peace-building program whereby the group is used as a therapeutic medium and an open environment for discussion and interpersonal healing.

[3] Multi-family therapy is a group-based approach that includes multiple families who have experienced wounds. It consists of healing dialogues about the intergenerational transmission of trauma and hostility. Group participants cultivate skills to strengthen collective responsibility and agency & improve communication patterns within and across families.

[4] The Sycamore Tree approach is a victim awareness program that teaches the principles and application of restorative justice. It enables inmates to understand the impact of their crime on victims, families, and the community. It also encourages inmates to accept personal responsibility for their actions and points to the need to make reparation.

[5] Graduates from community-healing spaces through collaborative livelihoods initiatives get opportunities for joint socio-economic activities to foster both progressive trust –building and Action-based community healing is characterized and evidenced by interpersonal relations between genocide perpetrators and genocide survivors who live in the same villages where forgiveness-seeking is done in practical way through routine and mutual benefit activities, resulting in psychological relief, and increase of the trust between perpetrators and victims.
economic resilience.

[6] Action-based community healing is characterized and evidenced by interpersonal relations between genocide perpetrators and genocide survivors who live in the same villages where

forgiveness-seeking is done in practical way through routine and mutual benefit activities, resulting in psychological relief, and increase of the trust between perpetrators and victims.

[7] Penal Reform International [PRI], 2010, final monitoring and research report on the Gacaca process.

[8] Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS) was established under Law N ° 34/2010 of 12/11/2010 as a result of merging the former National Prisons Service (NPS) and the Executive Secretariat of National Committee of Community Services as an alternative penalty to imprisonment (TIG). Since its establishment, RCS was mandated primarily to ensure reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates

[9] The Girinka program is one of the strategies towards these objectives. Its aim is to give to every poor family one cow that will help the poor families to increase their crop production by using manure, increase their income and their nutrition at the household level and country wide.

[10] Kjell Anderson, Moral Neutralization: Killing without consequences?

References

Allport G. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.; 1954.

Anderson, K. (2017). 'Who Was I to Stop the Killing?': Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators. 1, 39–63. https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.v1i1.49

Assimwe, A. (2007, February). Rwanda releases 8,000 genocide prisoners. Reuters Foundation AlertNet. *The News-Times*.

Barbara S. (2013). The rhetoric of reconciliation:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313368693

Bekoe, D. (2018). Genocide Studies and Prevention : An International Book Review : Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda : The Politics of History Book Review : Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda : The Politics of History. 12(1), 98–100.

Bertaux, D. (Ed.). (1981). *Biography and society: the life history approach in the social sciences*. Sage Publications.

Brehm, H. N., Uggen, C., & Gasanabo, J. (2014). Genocide , Justice , and Rwanda ' s Gacaca Courts. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *30*(3), 333 –352.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986214536660

Brewer, M.B.,&Miller,N.(1984).Beyondthecontacthypothesis:Theoreticalperspectives on desegregation.InN.Miller&M.Brewer(Eds),Groupsincontact:Thepsychologyofschooldesegregation(pp.281–302).Orlando, FL:AcademicPress.

Burke et al., 2017; van Ryn et al.,(2015) The effects of informal training experiences on explicit bias against African Americans among medical students. A report from the Medical students CHANGE study. Social Psychology Quality. Advance online publication.

Brunton-Smith I, Sturgis P, Leckie G. How collective is collective efficacy? The importance of consensus in judgments about community cohesion and willingness to intervene. *Criminology*. 2018;56(3):608-637.

Clark, P. (2010). *The Gacaca Court. Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda*. .Justice without Lawyers: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511761584

Clements, K. P., & Lee, S. Y. (2020). Multi-level reconciliation and peacebuilding: Stakeholder perspectives. Routledge. https://doi-org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.4324/9781003017851

Ditlmann R. K., Samii C., Can intergroup contact affect ingroup dynamics? Insights from a field study with Jewish and Arab–Palestinian youth in Israel. Peace Conf.: J. Peace Psychol. **22**, 380 (2016). [Google Scholar]

Dovidio et al., (2017) Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, · DOI: 10.1177/1368430217712052

Gaertner, D. (2011). "The climax of reconciliation": Transgression, apology, forgiveness, and the body in conflict resolution. Journal of Bioethical Inquiry, 8(3), 245-56. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-011-9317-z

J.J.,& Baumester, R. . (2000). *Expression of forgiveness and acceptance :Benefits and barriers.* (Thoresen (Ed.); In M.E.Mc).

Kohen, A., Zanchelli, M., & Kohen, A. (2011). Personal and Political Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda. *Social Justice Research*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-011-0126-7

Lederach, J. P. (1997). Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies. United States Institute of Peace

Press. https://www.amazon.com/BuildingPeace:SustainableReconciliationInDividedSocieties

Lauwaert, K., and Aertsen, I. (2016). With a little help from a friend: desistance through victim-offender mediation in Belgium. Restor.Just. Int. J. 4, 345–368. doi: 10.1080/20504721.2016.1245913.

Mafeza, F. (2013). Restoring the relationship between former genocide perpetrators and survivors of genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda through reconciliation villages. *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, *2*(2), 787–798.

Miller, 2002.Personalization and the promise of contact theory, journal of social issues (58 (2): 387

Mitchell, C. (2014). The nature of intractable conflict resolution in the twenty first century (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan UK. Print. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137454157.

Mu, F., & Bobocel, D. R. (2019). Why did I say sorry? Apology motives and transgressor perceptions of reconciliation. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 40(8), 912-930. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2376.

NURC. (2015). *Assessing the reintegration of ex-genocide prisoners in Rwanda: Success and challenges*.

Parnell E. *The Role of Cooperatives and Other Self-Help Organizations in Crisis Resolution and Socio-Economic Recovery*. International Labour Organization; 2001.

Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhauser, E. W. (2011). Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanisation. Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York.

Repairing Trust Between Individuals and Groups: The Effectiveness of Apologies in Interpersonal and Intergroup Contexts.

RCS. (2019). *A call for prior sensitization on the release of Genocide convicts*. www.newtimes.co.rw/news/call-prior-sensitisation-release-genocide-convicts.

Schaap, A. (2003). Political Grounds for Forgiveness. *Contemporary Political Theory*, *2*(1), 7787.

SHERIF M, HARVEY OJ, WHITE BJ, SHERIF CW, CAMPBELL DT. *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation*. Wesleyan; Illustrated edition; 1988.

Shnabel, N., Nadler, A., Canetti-nisim, D., & Ullrich, J. (2008). *The Role of Acceptance and Empowerment in Promoting Reconciliation from the Perspective of the Needs-Based Model*. *2*(1), 159–186.

Shnabel N, Nadler A (2015). The Role of Agency and Morality in Reconciliation Processes: The Perspective of the Needs-Based Model. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2015;24(6):477–483. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44318888.

Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. Science, 277(5328), 918–924. http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science. 277.5328.918.

Staub, E. (2013). Building a Peaceful Society: Origins, prevention, and reconciliation after genocide and other group violence. *American Psychologist*, *68*(7), 576–589. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032045.

Tam, T., Hewstone, M., Cairns, E., Tausch, N., Maio, G., & Kenworthy, J. (2007). The impact of intergroup emotions on forgiveness in Northern Ireland. Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, 10(1), 119–135. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430207071345.

Tangney, J.P. & Dearing, R. (2004) Shame and Guilt. New York, Guilford.

Tobie, A. (2012). *Healing Fractured Lives : Reconciliation and reintegration in Rwanda* (Issue September).

Tavuchis, N. (1991). Mea culpa: A sociology of apology and reconciliation. Stanford University Press. https://www.amazon.com/Mea-Culpa.

UNODC. (2012). *Introductory Handbook on The Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders: Criminal Justice Handbook Series* (1st ed.). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

West, T. V., & Dovidio, J. F. (2013). Intergroup contact across time: Beyond initial contact. In G. Hodson

Zehr, H. (2010). *Changing lenses: A new focus for crime and justice* (3rd ed.). Herald Press.