Social repair in divided societies
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In many societies polarised following violent intergroup conflict and large-scale abuses, transitional justice initiatives have not dispelled divisive myths and group identities. This brief draws on lessons from the field of coexistence to suggest how transitional justice could promote reconciliation more effectively.

Key messages
- Reconciliation – the process of repairing relationships and societies at all levels and confronting dominant narratives of the past – is a core goal of transitional justice (TJ). However, TJ processes and mechanisms are unlikely to achieve this goal unless they promote coexistence.
- Coexistence initiatives include dialogue facilitation, intergroup projects aimed at achieving shared goals, and media campaigns designed to reframe the ‘other’. They can contribute to restoring trust, transforming perceptions and rebuilding relationships in divided societies.
- Transitional justice and coexistence initiatives can be mutually beneficial, and greater coordination could increase the impact of both. Community forums to design TJ strategies could build on established coexistence projects, and truth commissions could uncover the stories of those who saved the lives of ‘enemies’.

Societies that have suffered from violent intergroup conflict are often characterised by widespread distrust and fear of the ‘other’. However, the need to (re)build relationships in such contexts and to bridge divided communities has typically been neglected – even though reconciliation is seen as essential to preventing renewed conflict.

Transitional justice aims to achieve accountability and justice for large-scale past abuses – and reconciliation (UN Security Council, 2004). It is often assumed that reconciliation will follow automatically from macro-level TJ initiatives such as strengthening the justice system, implementing criminal trials, truth-seeking, reparations, or vetting war criminals and corrupt officials from government. This has not proven to be the case, however (Thoms et al, 2008 and 2010). Unless people’s lived realities are transformed, members of identity groups are likely to continue to focus on ‘data’ that confirm their existing beliefs.

Promoting reconciliation through coexistence initiatives
The field of coexistence adopts a bottom-up approach to reconciliation. It uses direct and personal intergroup contact, cooperation and dialogue, and explicitly promotes positive characteristics and narratives of the ‘other’.

Coexistence initiatives in divided societies have contributed to changing attitudes, repairing relationships and strengthening communities. Types of initiatives include:
- Joint initiatives that facilitate collaboration and dialogue. Even where people are unwilling to participate in ‘reconciliation’ projects, initiatives that encourage cooperation are still feasible and beneficial. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Rwanda in 2001-2002, the UNHCR established ‘Imagine Coexistence’ projects (including income-generating, psychosocial, sports-related, educational and cultural initiatives) to improve the environment for return and reintegration (UNHCR, 2003). UNHCR also implemented similar projects in Afghanistan in 2004. There, ‘peace committees’ identified activities – such as income generation or infrastructure development – that were then implemented jointly by the community (UNHCR, 2005). An independent evaluation of Imagine Coexistence highlighted the value of the ‘space for dialogue’ created (Babbitt et al., 2002).
- Associations that facilitate intergroup networks and broaden social identities. Associations enable self-help, mutual help, solidarity and cooperation. For example, intergroup associations of milk producers in BiH increased community incomes, encouraging further collaboration and informal ties (UNDP, 2009). Associations can foster coexistence without specifying intergroup involvement as a condition for support. They can help to develop civic trust and a culture of citizenship as well as to restore societal relations (Benequista, 2010).

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Media initiatives that reframe the ‘other’. Media programming can help to: counter stereotypes and misconceptions; depolarise attitudes by emphasising stories of intergroup cooperation; promote empathy by portraying similarities with the ‘other’; and facilitate dialogue and understanding. In Burundi, the radio production house Studio Ijambo was founded in 1995 to promote peace. For example, its programme ‘Heroes’ profiled people who, during the height of Burundi’s mass ethnic violence in 1993-96, risked their lives to save those of their ‘enemies’. A survey found that Studio Ijambo’s programmes had helped respondents to change their attitudes or behaviour toward the other ethnic group (Hagos, 2001).

Increasing the reach and impact of coexistence initiatives

The impact of community-based coexistence initiatives can be limited to direct participants, and they can be difficult to scale up: an important benefit of media programming is its potentially extensive reach. Studio Ijambo’s programme ‘Our Neighbours, Ourselves’ had an average audience of 85 per cent of Burundi’s population (Rolt, 2001). Political support can also help to scale up and amplify the effects of coexistence initiatives. When Studio Ijambo gathered at a Heroes’ Summit the 200 people it had profiled, government officials praised the heroes in a ‘Ceremony of Recognition’. Such official acknowledgement, broadcast live on the radio, prompted more people to share their stories (SFCG).

In order to contribute to higher level community and societal reconciliation processes, coexistence initiatives should be designed to promote vertical as well as horizontal connections. They can reach out to local authorities, and associations can provide links to political activities (Benequista, 2010).

Long-term funding is needed to sustain coalitions of change agents, fostered through training and leadership development processes, in order to maximise reach and impact (Chigas and Ganson, 2003). This is especially important in hostile political contexts.

Applying lessons from coexistence

Trials and truth commissions could have a greater effect in conjunction with coexistence work: people already interacting across group divides would be more likely to explore and understand the facts uncovered and decisions made in trials. In addition:

- Those working on TJ outreach could seek to partner with the producers of media initiatives that promote positive images of the ‘other’
- Once neutral community projects have established an atmosphere of collaboration, inclusive participatory community forums could build on these to explore and design relevant TJ strategies
- Truth-finding mechanisms could include helping to unify people in their mandate, and could document positive as well as negative stories

Coordination to maximise synergies

While TJ and coexistence initiatives can reinforce each other, lack of coordination has constrained potential synergies. Greater interdisciplinary and interagency coordination is important for the efficient, comprehensive and long-term planning of recovery in conflict-affected societies. This could involve sharing expertise, developing more coherent strategies and pooling funds.

References

Babbitt, E. et al., 2002, ‘Imagine Coexistence: Assessing Refugee Reintegration Efforts in Divided Communities’, Tufts University, Boston
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Learn more


About the author

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