

rtc

responding to conflict

Only Through Dialogue

The Somali Way to Peace

This film was commissioned by Responding to Conflict. It was filmed by Robert Maletta and produced by Trojan Horse Productions Ltd with funding from Comic Relief and the Samuel Rubin Foundation.

NOTES ACCOMPANYING THE 'ONLY THROUGH DIALOGUE' VIDEO

1) Introduction

The British Government declared a protectorate in Northern Somalia in 1886. The territory was known as British Somaliland until June 1960 when the territory gained independence from Britain. Within days of gaining independence from Britain, the former British Somaliland joined with the newly independent former Italian Somaliland to form the Republic of Somalia.

In May 1991, following a decade of violent civil war and the oppressive dictatorship of President Siad Barre, the Somaliland Republic was formed, independent of Somalia, and on the same territory as the former British Somaliland.

During the civil war tremendous damage was done to the infrastructure of the country, particularly to communications systems, schools, factories and hospitals. The economy was in ruins and there was a legacy of an enormous arsenal of weapons which remained in the country and which were used by young men, traumatised in the war, to carry out lootings and killings which terrorised the population.

Both Somalia and Somaliland are based on a clan system, where people owe allegiance to their clan rather than to the state. Conflict in the region is both inter- and intra-clan, with elders in the clans traditionally having much authority. These traditional structures and processes had been systematically eroded by Siad Barre's 'scientific socialism'.

In the first four years of its existence Somaliland suffered a series of inter-clan battles for control of power and resources. In order to bring an end to these conflicts the people of Somaliland revived a traditional peace process which involved including all the stake holders in the discussions, with a view to reaching a peace agreement.

Firstly, peace had to be established between the major clans in the north, which divided into those who had supported the former regime of President Siad Barre and those who had fought against it. Once this was achieved, more conferences were held to deal with intra-clan fighting. This series of peace talks was convened by the traditional leaders of the northern clans, and succeeded in resolving armed conflicts, which had been breaking out sporadically.

People were, understandably, mistrustful of state structures, which had been abused under the Barre regime. Security services and the police had been used by the ruling clique to protect their own interests and to oppress the majority. Government was based on the use of force rather than by consent of the people. It was against this background that the peace process was attempted.

This video looks at the peace process that occurred in Somaliland and what lessons can be learned from that process.

a) Traditional Processes – The Role of the Elders

Traditional leaders decided that continuing to fight was not in their peoples' interests as there could be no winner. They decided that they needed to focus on their own interests. The traditional leaders on both sides started to communicate with each other. Initial communication was by letter, delivered by women (for the role of women, see later section).

A meeting was held in Sanaag, where a cease-fire was agreed. This gave the momentum for the peace process to continue. A series of meetings were held over an eighteen month period where delegations of elders talked to each other. The concept of time was a vital one. This was not a process that could be rushed. The elders knew that if a durable peace was to be established it would involve a lengthy process where all the issues could be aired and that encouraged energy and commitment to address blockages to the process.

The peace talks were successful in compensating groups which had lost livestock or kinsmen, in establishing security arrangements and in formulating a 'National Peace Charter'.

b) Blending The Old and The New

The elders called upon the intellectual elite to help hammer out technical problems relating to local administration and to help draft the accords. These two groups worked side by side, blending traditional and modern conflict management methods to address the core issues of concern. This way of working co-operatively provided a model for future working. The role of women also underwent some modifications as traditional and contemporary approaches to conflict were explored.

c) The Role of Women

Women played a key role in the peace process. The original peace talks were facilitated through an initiative of the women, where they acted as the intermediaries between the clans, carrying letters back and forth.

Women are in a position to do this because they are able to move between the different clans. They belong to both the clans they are born into and the clans they marry into, whereas men belong only to the clan that they are born into.

Women can contribute to peace or war according to their choice and exert considerable influence upon the men. Examples from this conflict are:

- Women from different clans went to the opposing sides during fighting and read poems and lobbied for an end to the fighting. This was successful.

- Women who were educated wrote to newspapers, warning that there would be real problems if the fighting did not stop.
- Women threatened not to cook for the men, which alarmed the men and led to the signing of a peace agreement.
- Women proposed the creating of a police force. They supported the idea, encouraged others and wrote proposals for the setting up of a police force in order to maintain the peace in Somaliland.
- Women contacted groups and clans that shared common goals and demonstrated that it is not only men that have an interest in the future of their society. They made it clear that women are a very important part of society and that they have a right to reject what harms them and their children.

d) The Importance of Consensus

The peace process could not have worked if the government had attempted to impose it. It had to work from the grass roots level, where smaller bilateral peace meetings between clans reconciled differences.

The different local leadership structures gradually evolved into a government structure. People came to respect the government's role in mediating disputes and supported the development of the institutions of government. A series of peace conferences developed the basis of a social compact which helped to ensure that the government ruled by consent and in accordance with agreed checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power.

Democracy in Somaliland is based on consensus. The western model of majority rule would simply not work in Somaliland. There are too many interests that have to be accommodated. Each group or clan effectively has a veto. If it does not approve of an agreement it can opt out. This can lead to conflict which can become violent.

e) When Consensus Breaks Down

In 1994, there was a problem when consensus broke down. It led to one group taking up arms when they felt that they would be disadvantaged by an agreement that was made. This led to an armed struggle, lasting for two years.

It was resolved by returning to dialogue where it was acknowledged that there were problems with the social compact. This led to a re-negotiation and concessions were made on both sides. Consensus had to be re-built. This whole episode was a reminder of the fragility of the peace accord and that where the consensus is not working there is a need to re-negotiate.

f) The Role of International Organisations

The experience in Somaliland (and, indeed, many other areas of the world) is that international agencies tend to focus on relief and rehabilitation rather than on peacebuilding. Humanitarian programmes seem to lack an understanding of the interplay between development and conflict: how development can be used to help build a sustainable peace.

External intervention and assistance often overwhelms existing local initiatives. These interventions need to be carried out in a sensitive way, which strengthens the capacities of local communities, NGOs and community based organisations. These organisations need to be treated as equal partners with specialist local knowledge and access to communities that international organisations simply cannot reach. While many international organisations treat local organisations merely as sub-contractors rather than partners, some are trying to build sustainable peace at local level.

One example is the British aid agency, Action Aid. They have been working in the Sanaag region since 1982. They employ mostly local staff, who know the area. They work as facilitators, bringing people together rather than being distributors of resources. They try and build local capacities so that local people can resolve their own conflicts and manage their own projects.

One example of this was when conflict between two clans brought development to a halt. Action Aid facilitated a meeting between the two clans at a workshop on conflict resolution in order to help them resolve their differences. They provided practical assistance in the form of fuel and money to transport community members and elders to a central meeting place. They provided a forum for the two communities to come together to analyse the situation and to come up with solutions to the problems.

In order to carry out this role Action Aid staff have to be actively involved in the communities and to be seen as impartial in any disputes that arise.

g) The Future

Somaliland has made a journey to peace by successfully breaking the vicious circle of violence and destruction that lasted so long. People have managed to create a situation in which they are gaining from peace and development. They have managed this, not by force of arms but by people talking with each other: by consultation, by consensus.

The peace is still fragile. It is possible that violent conflict between or within clans could break out again, but the mechanisms are in place to deal with the conflict if it emerges once again. The peace needs building on and consolidating if it is to become durable.

What is not within Somaliland's control is what happens in the rest of the region. If conflicts elsewhere are not resolved, it is possible that they could erupt and endanger Somaliland's fragile peace.

2) Implications For Practitioners

What messages are there in the Somaliland video for practitioners? The following are some that we have drawn from it. You may find others and you may disagree with some of our conclusions. They are just intended to be a start to the debate.

- Building durable peace is a long-term commitment: these processes take time and have to proceed at a pace that is appropriate to the people involved.
- Women have a vital part to play, even when it would appear that the power structures are controlled by men.
- Nothing will happen until someone or a group takes responsibility for starting the process.
- It is important to:
 - use existing traditional processes;
 - combine traditional peace processes with modern conflict management methods, where appropriate;
 - allow sufficient time for all the issues to be raised and resolved;
 - involve all the stake holders in the peace process;
 - build consensus if the peace is to be durable;
 - persuade people that everyone will gain from having a more peaceful society;
 - set up mechanisms to deal with new disputes in a fair and just way as they arise, to prevent them escalating into violence;
 - find ways for the international community to intervene positively and sensitively, supporting existing local initiatives and developing local capacities so that existing initiatives and organisations are not overwhelmed.

3) Using The Video With A Group

The following are some ideas on how the video might be used in a group to generate discussion, or as part of a training event.

These suggestions are not intended to be prescriptive. Group leaders, facilitators and trainers are encouraged to use their own creativity in deciding how best to use the material.

- Allow at least as long to discuss the video as it takes to watch it (30 minutes).
- Explain something about the background of the situation to the group before showing the video.

You may want to use the points below as a basis for guiding the discussion:

- As they watch ask people to make notes about particular ideas or issues that strike them *or* ask people to watch the video without making notes and try and retain points of interest for discussion later.

- Ask people to note any similarities and differences to conflict situations they themselves are experiencing or have experienced.
- Either as a whole group, or in small groups, ask people to discuss their response to the video. Ask them what it has contributed anything to their understanding of working with conflict situations.
- Either as a whole group or in small groups, ask people to discuss whether there are any ideas in the video that could be applicable to a conflict situation they are experiencing or could potentially experience in the future.
- If group members are currently working or living in a conflict situation, ask them to consider what, if any, action they or their organisations might consider taking to try and improve the current situation.

Responding to Conflict (RTC) works internationally to provide practical capacity – building programmes in support of people working for peace, rights and sustainable development.

For more information contact:

Responding to Conflict, 1046 Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 121 415 5641

Fax: +44 (0) 121 415 4119

E-Mail: enquiries@respond.org

Website: <http://www.respond.org/>

Registered charity no: 1015906