

rtc
responding to conflict

The Wajir Story

This film was commissioned by Responding to Conflict. It was
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NOTES ACCOMPANYING 'THE WAJIR STORY' VIDEO

1) Background To The Situation

The video tells the story of conflicts that have arisen in the Wajir District in Kenya's Northeast Province from 1991 until 1998 when the video was made. Conflicts amongst these Nomadic pastoralists concern access to and control over scarce resources: land as it relates to political constituency and political representation in the National arena. The causes of the conflict are multi-faceted and complex and contain both national and regional elements.

Wajir district is underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of Kenya. Even in times of peace infrastructure, education and the economy are significantly underdeveloped. When this situation is exacerbated by a terrible drought and a huge influx of refugees from Ethiopia and Somalia, fleeing the conflicts there, it is a recipe for disaster.

This is what happened in 1991/92 leading to the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1992. Fierce fighting erupted: there was theft, robbery, looting, destruction, rape and murder. By late 1993 almost no part of Wajir District was safe and 'normal life' ground to a halt. Neither traditional systems of clan-based justice nor the Kenyan justice system worked as they did not meet the needs and aspirations of the community in transition from a traditional to a modern system of governance. Hence it required a delicate balance and creative conflict management structures and mechanisms.

This video explores the responses of the local community to this conflict and how they set about trying to stop the escalation of violence, bring about a period of peace and use that to start building for the future in a way that could mean that the peace is enduring.

It is rarely, if ever, possible or desirable to examine one particular conflict and try and transfer the 'solutions' directly to another conflict situation. However there are many ideas and processes used in Wajir which may provide useful learning and be adaptable for use in other conflict situations.

2) Handling The Conflict

a) The Role of Women

This Somali society, in common with many others, has a long-standing tradition of the Elders being exclusively male. Nonetheless, women play a very important part in Somali society, particularly in situations of war and peace. The women exert a strong influence over whether the men take a war-like or peaceful stance.

This process of searching for peace started with the women talking amongst themselves and deciding that they wanted an end to the conflicts. They started locally

where they could influence things - such as the conflicts at the market. They monitored the situation and then took action to try and resolve conflicts that arose.

They appreciated that this was a local manifestation of a wider problem. While the conflicts at the market could be dealt with locally, if the wider problems were to be addressed, they needed to involve not only the women, but the Elders, the Youth, the Religious Leaders and the District Committee.

b) Working At Different Levels In Society

The women formed the Wajir Women's Association for Peace and decided that they needed to involve the Elders, the Chiefs of the three major clans and the Government, in the form of the District Security Committee.

The women realised that there was potential danger to themselves in getting involved and that they might well encounter prejudice and resistance to their involvement. They teamed up with concerned men and formed the Wajir peace group which started the process of dialogue between the clans in conflict and also involved the government in the process.

They identified one of the elders, who was not from one of the three major clans, as an ally and he was able to use his influence to bring the other elders round. This led to the formation of an 'Elders for Peace' group. A meeting was called by a local member of parliament and the 'Al Fatah Declaration' was agreed, which set out guidelines for a return to peace. Investigative teams were set up comprising elders from each clan. Their role was to try and discover the truth in conflict situations and make fair and just judgements. Crucially, the mixed composition of the teams led to them being trusted.

Another vital group to be won over was the youth. With high unemployment and not much hope for the future, the young men were likely to continue the fighting unless a more attractive alternative could be found. Youth groups were formed that spread the message of peace to those who were still fighting and to the various communities. Projects were set up to provide gainful employment for the youths.

c) The Importance of Declarations, Symbols and Rituals

The importance of these for celebrating and encouraging peace should not be underestimated. Organising festivals to honour publicly those who promote peace and persuading local businesses that it is in their financial interest to support the peace process financially were key elements used in this situation.

d) Involving The Militia

A key group that was identified was the militia and ex-militia. They needed to be persuaded of the benefits of peace, to be re-integrated into civil society and be assisted in finding meaningful employment. Identifying key people who could

influence their colleagues was an important strategy. Again, the role of the women was crucial. As the ex-militia leader said, 'his wife wanted peace, therefore he wanted peace'. The granting of an amnesty and the subsequent handing in of guns added to peoples' feelings of security. Also crucial was the availability of funds from the District Commissioner to help people get started in new enterprise.

e) Balancing Traditional and Constitutional Systems of Justice

There is a strong and long-standing traditional system of justice amongst Somalis. In addition, it needed to be acknowledged that the Somalis were living in another country, Kenya, which has its own system of constitutional justice. It was important for everyone to acknowledge the existence of both codes and find ways of ensuring that the two systems worked in co-operation with each other rather than in opposition to each other.

f) Towards Reconciliation

The role of religious leaders was also important. Both Christian and Muslim leaders were key figures in working with their communities. The organisation of preaching tours by leaders of the two groups was crucial in spreading the message to reject violence and begin the process of reconciliation.

g) Co-ordinating The Work of Different Groups

A number of different groups were all trying to bring about peace: the Women, the Elders, and the Youth. Talks between the various groups led to agreement to co-ordinate efforts and to the setting up of the Wajir Peace and Development Committee. Clearly this Committee needed to co-ordinate its activities with the work of the District Committee. Moves were made for this to happen and the Wajir Peace and Development committee became part of the District Development Committee chaired by the District Commissioner. This ensured not only co-operation and co-ordination, but also legitimacy as all groups who had a stake in the Peace Process were included in the decision-making process.

h) Rapid Response Teams

It was realised that it was important to set up structures to deal with new disputes as they arose to try and prevent them from escalating into serious conflicts. The Rapid Response Teams were set up comprising members of the District Security Committee, elders, women and youth to investigate problems and meet with all sides involved to work on resolving the problem.

There is a strong tradition of revenge. If a member of one clan commits a crime against a member of another clan, honour would demand that this crime be avenged, often leading to an escalation of violence. Intervention by the Rapid Response Teams to persuade the clan members to allow the legal authorities to deal with the issue as a

crime was crucial in preventing the escalation of violence. Clearly the response had to be rapid!

i) The Importance of Training

Training is a vital area of work, particularly when it is helping to equip people with new skills, explaining ideas about analysing the causes of conflicts and in attempting to bring about changes in attitudes and thinking.

Training workshops for religious leaders were organised before they undertook their preaching tours; training was given to members of the District security forces to help them understand Somali culture; training was given to the Somali people on how to interact with the army and the police, and training was given to people to help them analyse the causes of conflict and how they might intervene appropriately.

As with all training, it cannot simply be 'imported' from another cultural setting; it was adapted to be relevant to the people being trained.

j) Sustaining Peace

The situation in Wajir today is peaceful due, in no small part, to the efforts of the people portrayed in this video. There is always the danger that the absence of violence will lead to complacency. But, as we know from many different conflicts, peace is not merely the absence of war. If peace is to be durable, society needs to be based on a system of social justice that is acceptable to the communities, and the roots of the conflict have to be addressed. This is understood in Wajir, and the work towards durable peace continues.

k) The Importance of Anticipating Conflict and Violence and Putting Mechanisms and Structures In Place to Deal with it

The Peace and Development Committee used analysis to make strategies, and also to anticipate likely conflict just before the 1997 election. They had strategies for managing the conflict before, during and after the election.

l) The Importance of Addressing Some of the Root Causes of the Conflict

For example:

- Working on changing attitudes through the interaction of exchange visits, and working together on raising awareness of their own prejudices.
- Working on the policy of isolation and working towards integration through investment, e.g. a World Bank assisted project.
- The issues of political constituency, land and representation were addressed by adding a fourth constituency to give the Ajuran clan the opportunity for representation in the National arena.

3) Implications For Practitioners

What messages are there in **The Wajir Story** for practitioners? The following are ones that we have drawn from it. You may find others and you may disagree with some of our conclusions. The following comments are offered as a start to the debate.

- Building durable peace is a long-term commitment: these processes take time and have to move 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.
- Similarly the youth have an important role to play, even though they are not represented in traditional power structures.
- Nothing will happen until someone or a group takes responsibility for starting the process.
- The importance of working within existing traditional and governmental structures.
- If the process is to work, it is important that people at all levels of society are included from government officials through to ordinary people, holding no position of rank or authority.
- Peace efforts need to be co-ordinated in order to have a chance of succeeding.
- People may expose themselves to personal danger by becoming involved.
- The importance of symbols and rituals for the Peace Process.
- There is a need to persuade people that everyone will gain from having a more peaceful society.
- The importance of acknowledging and respecting Traditional and Constitutional systems of justice.
- The need to involve the combatants in the process; the need for disarming and re-integration of ex-combatants into civil society.
- The need for financial support to enable people to re-build their lives and start again.
- The importance of religious leaders in spreading messages of nonviolence, forgiveness and reconciliation.
- The need to set up mechanisms to deal in a fair and just way with new disputes as they arise, to prevent them escalating into violence.
- The importance of training to help provide people with new ideas and new techniques, and to help change views and attitudes.
- The need to build a sustainable peace, based on notions of social justice
- The need to remain vigilant, lest the injustices and the violence return.

4) 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. They are not designed to be prescriptive: Group Leaders, Facilitators and Trainers should use their creativity in how best to use the material.

- Allow at least as long (35 minutes) to discuss the video afterwards, as it takes to watch it.
- Explain something about the background of the conflict to the group before they see the video.
- Ask people to make notes as they watch about particular ideas or issues that strike them *or* ask people to watch the video without making notes and to 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 whether 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.

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