

PEACE & RECOVERY PROGRAM | POLICY MEMO

Sierra Leone: Does Reconciliation Heal the Wounds of War?



Post-conflict reconciliation led to greater forgiveness of war perpetrators and strengthened social capital, but at the cost of reduced psychological health.

Most wars today are civil wars, which divide countries along economic, ethnic or political lines. In many cases, these cleavages happen within communities, pitting one neighbor against another. The prevalence of civil wars has therefore spurred efforts to re-build social cohesion and promote social capital as a part of post-conflict recovery.

Truth and reconciliation processes are a common approach used across the world to promote this type of societal healing. These processes bring war victims face-to-face with perpetrators in forums where victims describe war atrocities, and perpetrators confess to war crimes without facing punishment. Proponents of reconciliation processes claim that they are highly effective – not only in rebuilding social ties among individuals and promoting societal healing, but also in providing psychological relief and aiding individual healing. Yet, there is little rigorous evidence of whether, and how, reconciliation processes help communities heal from conflict.

To shed light on this topic, researchers from New York University, Georgetown University and the World Bank partnered with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) to evaluate the impact of a community-level reconciliation program in Sierra Leone.

The program, which was designed and implemented by a Sierra Leonean NGO, had several features in common with truth and reconciliation processes from around the world, bringing victims face to face with perpetrators in community forums. Victims described war atrocities; perpetrators admitted to crimes and sought forgiveness for their actions; and no one was compensated financially or punished for participating. The forums in the study took place 2011-2012, a decade after the civil war ended.

The independent, randomized evaluation revealed that reconciliation had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it promoted societal healing: it led to greater forgiveness of perpetrators and strengthened various measures of social capital. On the other hand, these gains came at the cost of reduced psychological health: the program worsened depression, anxiety and trauma.

The results suggest that talking about war atrocities can prove psychologically traumatic by invoking war memories and re-opening old war wounds. The researchers conclude that reconciliation programs should be re-designed in ways that minimize their psychological costs, while retaining their societal benefits.

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