



Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH



# **From Dealing with the Past to Future Cooperation** Regional and Global Challenges of Reconciliation

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General Report

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## **From Dealing with the Past to Future Cooperation: Regional and Global Challenges of Reconciliation**

From January 31st to February 2nd 2005 the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH (German Technical Cooperation) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) hosted a joint conference on reconciliation processes in Berlin. Over 60 experts from five different regions of the world discussed about commonalities and patterns of reconciliation processes by comparing their specific regional experiences. The conference started with a panel discussion, which gave already an overview to problems and perspectives of the different regions. The following two days consisted of dense discussions, first in the regional working groups, then in the plenary where the specific regional experiences were compared and condensed. The result was a set of statements, representing the problems the protagonist are faced within the process on reconciliation. The only universally applicable result was, that there are only a few similarities between the regions and a huge range of different defiances.

The conference closed with a panel discussion on the most critical questions that emerged during the working groups and debates. Between them the question on how the international community can improve their support of reconciliation processes.

This report tries to summarise the central results of the conference. It cannot contain all the diversity of opinions and the useful comments and insights from the various discussions. The organisers hope that cross-regional exchange will continue between the participants.

The report is complemented by the reports on the working groups on Latin America, Southeast Europe, Southeast Asia, Central Africa, and the Arab World, see [www.gtz.de/reconciliation](http://www.gtz.de/reconciliation).

### **Reconciliation – a universal concept?**

There was a clear consensus that there is no clear definition for the term reconciliation. In most languages discussed there is even no literal translation of the term as such. In this context, a very clear warning was made towards the international community: using the term reconciliation could lead to resistance in the concerned country – if there is no “own” word for reconciliation, people might feel that there is something “western” imposed on them which does not make sense in their context.

Still, the concept of former enemy groups trying to re-build a peaceful relationship with each other exists in every of the concerned regions. There is also an agreement that

- reconciliation does not necessarily include “forgetting”, and for sure not “forgiving”,
- reconciliation is a long-term process which does not follow concrete steps, but rather a highly context-specific dynamic,
- reconciliation has to come from inside the society and cannot be forced from outside,
- individual reconciliation cannot be expected, the focus should rather be on social reconciliation, and
- social reconciliation must be a collective and inclusive process and requires a deep societal and political change.

Besides that, reconciliation can be understood as a “container term” where all the various needs of the respective society can be summarised: Democratisation for example was a very important aspect of reconciliation in the Arab countries, whereas in Latin America the establishment of legitimate political institutions was emphasized and in Central Africa the criminal prosecution of perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide.

## **Is there a universal pattern of reconciliation processes?**

### **Truth and Justice**

The telling and documentation of factual truth about committed atrocities as well as the criminal prosecution of the perpetrators seem to be universal ingredients of reconciliation processes. Though it is clear that there is not one truth about what happened and that justice will never be fully reached, a continuous strive towards “more” truth and “better” justice returns dignity to the victims of violence and therefore strengthens humanity as an integral value of the “new” society. Most of the participants of the conference asked for a stronger emphasis on restorative in contrast to criminal justice.

Truth Commissions that collect and document factual truth are a very prominent (South Africa, Latin America) and potentially powerful instrument, but might not be always appropriate: In the case of Serbia the commission failed, because it was not perceived as a credible institution: First of all because it was a US-driven idea, and then the commission was politically instrumentalised to prove the others being guilty. In the case of Sri Lanka, it is far too early for a truth commission, because there is not even a peace agreement signed by now. But in both cases, other ways and levels of telling and documenting truth can be supported.

Similar to Truth Commissions, International Criminal Courts belong to the standard instruments of the international community after violent conflict. They play an important role in the aftermath of war, because they can remove the perpetrators from power in their countries, they can demonstrate rule of law and fair trials and by that trigger dealing with the countries own past. At the same time, these criminal courts as an international intervention into state sovereignty can also hamper reconciliation processes, because they are not initiated from and implemented by local actors – resulting in a lack of ownership. Therefore, strengthening domestic courts to deal with cases of human right violation and war crimes must be a central task accompanying in International Criminal Courts.

### **Supporting victims and Devictimisation**

One very important universal aspect of reconciliation is overcoming the role of being victims. This is important for individuals as well as for a society as such.

Victims of violence are often deeply traumatised and therefore not able to take place in social life and re-building of society. The experience from Rwanda clearly showed that it is too early for reconciliation when the survivors of the genocide are still occupied with surviving. Though support of victims (concerning basic as well as psychosocial needs) is primarily a moral obligation, it could also serve long-term social interests. But: there is no right to

reconciliation for the perpetrators, and victims must not be put under pressure to reconcile. Therefore it is important to analyse who asks for reconciliation and why!

In South-Eastern Europe, each of the former enemy group perceives itself primarily as being victims. The acknowledgement of the fact that there are not only victims, but also perpetrators in each of these groups is a painful, but necessary experience and a step forward.

### **Time and timing**

Is there a universal sequence in reconciliation processes? Though there are probably no definite steps of reconciliation in a way that one development must necessarily be followed by another, there is at least a number of preconditions that might trigger reconciliation processes.

The process of reconciliation cannot start before people do not feel safe. Security from violence is the most important precondition. In a wider meaning security would also comprise the fulfillment of basic needs, such as e.g. food, water and shelter.

Then, there must be at least some local actors, usually a minority, who take ownership and responsibility and start action. In South-Eastern Europe even during the civil war, a regional network of civic society activists still hold contact that could be build upon when the fighting stopped.

As reconciliation requires a deep change – as well in social as in political terms – it usually goes hand in hand with regime change. People who committed crimes against humanity have to be deprived from power. The way how a political transformation takes place differs: an internal peaceful or violent revolution, a military victory of one group over the other(s) or an international intervention with an international protectorate as consequence. The new regime should be based at least on a minimum of democratic standards including rule of law. The working group on the Arab World made quite clear that for their region reconciliation is dependent on the democratisation progress in their countries.

### **How could the international community improve their support of reconciliation processes?**

#### **Lessons Learned:**

#### **Show critical solidarity, but do not impose!**

Support from outside is needed, but the way and the speed of reconciliation processes depend on internal social dynamics. Reconciliation cannot be imposed – doing that might even hamper reconciliation in the long term. Important is a constant and critical attention of the international community on the process. There should be a clear political position towards the country's performance on dealing with the past conflict based on solidarity with the victims of the conflict and striving towards justice based on truth.

**Do not go for glamorous assistance, but support with a long breath!**

The process of reconciliation consists of a lot of small steps, success is not immediately visible, and there might be steps back on the way. Therefore, support from outside must be patient and continuing. It might look very glamorous to support truth commissions and other prominent instruments associated with reconciliation, but the steady and serious support of transforming parts of the social system (e.g. educational reform, reform of political institutions) might be of higher value.

**Do your homework!**

There is no standard of reconciliation which can be “produced” by a defined set of instruments. Every approach to reconciliation has to take into account the special conflict history and culture of the concerned society. That means that the international community must analyse reasons for conflict and local concepts of reconciliation before they start intervening.

**Be a good example!**

The credibility of the international community plays a crucial role. That is especially true for bilateral donor countries. Their credibility strongly depends on their approach of dealing with their own past, e.g. in the context of the Second World War, but also in the context more recently interventions. Accordingly, international interventions on justice must always follow international standards of justice and human rights.