

*Youth participation and a recognition of spiritual healing - Transforming post-conflict societies to achieve the MDGs*

*"Rebuilding society implies a restoration of the people in social, psychological and spiritual ways. If these forces are not a part of the rebuilding of society at the end of war and in the post-war context, we just put the lid on a boiling cauldron that will eventually blow off because the pain, anger and fear of war were never dealt with." - Michael Wessells*

Youth play an important role in helping to achieve the MDGs. However, in post-conflict situations, young people are less likely to be ready to play a role, due in large part to the fact that they are very often physically and psychologically damaged by their experience during the conflict. War does not simply cause death and destruction; it also damages and destroys traditional norms and values, cutting 'invisible wounds'.

Youths who witness, experience or participate in violent acts, or who suffer the more social effects of armed conflict (including loss of family and destruction of social networks, hunger, and homelessness), are particularly prone to negative long-term effects. These situations affect moral development, which leads to aggression in interpersonal relations and general antisocial behaviour, providing greater potential for their own future participation in violence.

*Time* does not always heal those who have suffered emotionally and physically from violent acts from the war. Healing those wounds is important for youth to rebuild the peaceful society: They are the future of their countries and the world, and without an adequate healing process there is a great danger that the experiences of war may create a 'cycle of violence'.

Therefore reconciliation needs focused energy toward understanding the deeper healing process which will transform the wounded society to more conducive environment to achieve MDGs, healing must take a place. However, healing a youth's invisible wounds is not so simple. During and also after the war, the value systems of a society are fragile and the "wounds of war" cannot simply be characterized as just social, physical or even psychological. We must recognize spiritual healing in order to address deep trauma wrought by upon them by the phenomenon of total war.

Western psychology has long ignored religion and traditional beliefs, and has often categorized spirituality phenomena as dysfunctional due to the fact they are derived 'unscientifically'. However, psychology has recently begun to embrace the power and function of spirituality as an important factor in the healing process.

Spirituality may integrate, in a meaningful way, all areas of human experience and relies on this complex interplay to understand and to promote mental wellness, as well as create an environment where youth can heal and transform within a non-violent society. It is important, therefore, to recognize the role of spirituality, whether in a formal religious framework or in the form of traditional beliefs, for the achievement and maintenance of psychological well-being.

Religion too can be a powerful tool within the process of psychological well-being. Despite declining interest in the Western world, religion still remains a highly significant aspect in the lives of billions of people. Although in its many forms it has legitimated acts of political violence, it seems that cynics fail to appreciate the humane and humanizing attributes of religion and the moral constraints it imposes on intolerant and violent behaviour. Religion has also developed laws and ideas that have provided civilization with cultural commitments to critical peace-related values,

including empathy, openness, love for strangers, the suppression of unbridled ego and acquisitiveness, human rights, unilateral gestures of forgiveness and humanity, interpersonal repentance and the acceptance of responsibility for past errors as a means of reconciliation, and the drive for social justice.

Spirituality, whether within the framework of religion or not, fosters deep existential questions pertaining to the meaning of life, suffering, illness, relationships and so forth, as well as recognizing the need for human interconnectivity and the desire to transcend the self in meaningful ways.

Living through political violence makes it difficult to bring balance and stability for youth, especially when they are caught up with problems of everyday life, and are struggling to re-start new patterns of life and survival. By involving them in mythical beliefs and rituals, we begin to address the physical, emotional, mental, cultural and communal aspects of human beings. This then supports the healing process and prepares people for a transformation to re/establish values and meaning to their lives. This resource is essential to the development of effective and contextually meaningful.

The promotion of conflict management, peace building and reconciliation must not lead to a situation in which anger, hatred or fantasies of revenge are summarily dismissed or ignored. These reactions are understandable within the context of experiences of violence and repression, and should be treated accordingly. This is especially true where youth are concerned as they may grow up knowing only violence. If their vital development period has been disrupted by war, any experience of violence or trauma may adversely shape their personalities and worldviews. By having an opportunity to participate in the spiritual healing process, youth gain insight into and control over their feelings, creating an environment to achieve the MDGs. Without this recognition, any true reconciliation or peace building will not be possible.