



Transforming Conflict Systems in Africa
Implications for Practitioners and Policy Makers

International African Solidarity Reception
30th October 2013

Co-hosted by the ACTION Support Center and the University of Johannesburg

Report of the proceedings

A transformative approach to social conflict requires strong collaborative partnerships between individuals, organisations, institutions and the systems within which they exist. In line with this approach, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the ACTION Support Centre (ASC) have nurtured a cooperative and collaborative partnership, which recently led to their co-hosting a stimulating afternoon of dialogue and debate.

Under the umbrella of *Transforming Conflict Systems in Africa - Implications for Practitioners and Policy Makers*, ACT course participants travelled to UJ for the second ASC/UJ co-hosted panel discussion of 2013. Participants were joined by UJ Masters level and PhD students, senior academics, government representatives, activists and individuals from a variety of NGOs and local peace committee members.

Professor Chris Landsberg, SARCHi Chair of African Diplomacy and Foreign Policy at UJ co-Chaired the afternoon's proceedings with Fatima Swartz, Steering Committee Representative of the ACTION for Conflict Transformation Network and ACT course facilitator. In addition to Professor Landsberg, the panel welcomed Ms Zeenat Adam, Director of the Horn of Africa and Indian Ocean Islands at the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and Mr Na'eem Jeenah, Director at Afro-Middle East Centre and a distinguished international solidarity and progressive Muslim activist.

Discussions began with a rich contribution from Ms Adam who offered insights into South Africa-Somali relations, framed within the context of the African Renaissance. Ms Adam recognised the power of citizens' alliances and community collectives, encouraging the mobilisation of these collectives as a meaningful way of exerting influence on policy at national level. Ms Adam reflected on the role of

AMISOM in Somalia's civil conflict, stating that military interventions are not the solution to Africa's problems going forward.

The audience was invited to contemplate identity and more specifically a deeper understanding of the African identity. Further thought was encouraged as to the capacity of regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community and African Union, to strengthen the concept of a common continental identity. As part of the ACT course foundations, participants started the week considering how identity is affected by perception.

Through discussions, the group identified particular need for strong African leadership, as well as enhanced regional co-operation in order to promote economic development and social cohesion.

Following Ms Adam's presentation, challenging debate reflected concerns around South Africa's recent military involvement in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo and the real interests driving this involvement. As course participants deepened their analysis of conflict systems throughout the week, Ms Adam's presentation and responses connected them to practical examples from South Africa, SADC and the continent more broadly, providing valuable learning material from which to build upon and apply various tools for analysis; for example, deepening our understanding of the positions, interests and needs motivating South Africa's domestic and foreign policy.

Mr Na'eem Jeenah furthered the afternoon's discussions through his address on Afro-Middle East Relations and its meaning in the context of International African Solidarity. Mr Jeenah's strong background as an anti-Apartheid activist rooted his contribution in the belief that civil society is powerful and through collaboration and the building of strong networks, positive change can be realised across multiple levels. He spoke of the importance of solidarity and the values of commitment and democracy which underpin this support, reminding the audience of the immense international support received by South Africans during the Apartheid era.

Integral to the ACT course process is the building of cultures of people-to-people solidarity, and the perspectives shared by Mr Jeenah were particularly poignant for the group in this regard. Over 14 country nationalities were represented on the course and there was broad diversity within the audience in attendance. Discussions relating to the power of solidarity and the concept of Ubuntu, which sits at the core of conflict transformation, located our struggles in a common humanity. The struggle of Palestinians is our struggle, the struggle of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo is our struggle and the struggle of the Syrian people is our struggle.

The group was cautioned to consider the foreign agendas of nation states and in whose interest relations between states and investors are developed; for example, how would the situation in Syria be different if Africa was brokering peace instead of the US and Russia; or in the case of Libya, if the AU had taken a stronger position in the face of the NATO-led invasion. Mr Jeenah explored this concept in relation to the development, management and distribution of Africa's land and natural resource wealth, inviting civil society to look more deeply at building bridges across borders and supporting those most vulnerable and marginalised in our societies.

Professor Chris Landsberg was the concluding speaker, and explored the implications of the BRICS economic alliance and the challenges BRICS presents for Africa.

Within the paradigm of International Relations, Professor Landsberg examined South Africa's involvement as the only African state included in the BRICS alliance. He probed the audience to consider how and

whether South Africa is representing the interests of the continent, and how the continent feels about its inclusion in BRICS. Concerns were raised around the lack of regional cooperation across African states and how civil society and partnerships between organisations and institutions, like ASC and UJ, can collaborate to influence policy discourse.

Discussions following Professor Landsberg's dynamic presentation pointed to the necessity of strengthening Africa's regional bodies and restoring Africa's agency through African action. He challenged the group to look within and iterated another critical concept underpinning conflict transformation, which is that change begins first with ourselves and spreads to the relationships, families, institutions, and cultures of which we are integral parts.

Lessons emerging from the discussions

- Working as inclusive collectives promotes sustainable development
- As individuals and communities we need to engage leadership and policy-makers to understand in whose interests relationships are formed and policy decisions made. Examples to this effect suggested:
 - Considering the links between South Africa's domestic and foreign policy
 - Understanding the relationships between external interests and investments in Africa's resources
 - Promoting inclusive development practice and transparent documentation around resource distribution
- Reflecting on the solidarity South Africa received during the Apartheid struggle – how are we connecting with Palestinians and other oppressed peoples suffering around the world?
- How are relationships developing between civil society in different countries – are we connecting with one another?
- A lack of political leadership and accountability in some African states is further undermined by external powers and interests, ultimately creating divisions within our societies
 - There is a need to strengthen regional bodies in Africa and to be clear on Africa's goals and vision for development of its' systems, structures and resources
- There is a need to restore African agency by Africans
- South Africa must be cognisant of its representation on the BRICS platform, and as a key representative for the African continent
- As individuals and collectives we all have the power to effect change

The well researched, thought provoking and challenging presentations delivered by each of the three panelists highlighted the multiple connections and perspectives needing to be factored into analysis of social, economic, political and environmental conflict. A strong need for cooperation and collaboration between civil society, organisations, institutions and governments emerged from the discussion, with a need to improve access to education and consider our common humanity and humility at the core of this change. ACT course participants and the audience as a whole had an opportunity to strengthen their individual and mutual networks and consider how best to put the lessons learned into practice.

The ACTION Support Centre would like to thank the Chair of African Diplomacy and Foreign Policy, Professor Landsberg and Viwe Koti the SARCHI Secretary for their ongoing support and hard work in contributing to the success of the event.