Getting a measure of the Truth?

Some thoughts on post-conflict peace monitoring

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, the organisation I work for, is involved in various attempts to monitor and assess performance of countries in terms of their progress towards social inclusion. I will look at the findings of these studies towards the end of the article but first I want to discuss some of the questions we have had to consider in carrying out these studies, questions which include:

Who measures and why?

One has always to begin with the important distinction, though it is one that is often impossible to clearly demarcate, namely between the facilitator-change agent and the researcher-observer. Does measuring change facilitate change? Does it become itself an agent of change, and to what degree is it both? What does this say about scientific "objectivity" or about local ownership, or indeed, about benchmarking? In my view one should recognise upfront that tracking peace is an inherently political act with scientific aspirations, rather than a scientific act with political aspirations. At least this is acknowledged by our funders who increasingly demand to see "impact" of our impact measurements, that is, they want to know who acknowledges and "acts" on this information.

Measuring what?

Together with Notre Dame University's Kroc Institute and Manchester University, we have launched an Everyday Peace Indicator project in a number of areas in Zimbabwe, South Africa, South Sudan and Uganda, but within the context of an ongoing facilitative role in terms of social cohesion. The EPI project, self-consciously, seeks to overcome some of the challenges in identifying suitable indicators by giving voice to communities themselves in determining what it is that they would like to see measured, but even such an imaginative approach is not exempt from questioning.

> What for example, is the effect of raising some, and not other questions, some issues, but not others?

The project correctly raises the incredible complexity of the issues we are seeking to measure. Getting a measure of something implies of course that there has been a certain settling of a specific debate, and an agreement about desirable future goals, but the last thing that seems possible or perhaps even desirable to settle post-conflict is to agree what is worth measuring, and by whom and for what purpose . Outcomes are important, but at the same time, peace-making is precisely about creating open-ended societies as opposed to closed, oppressive ones.

For example, reconciliation ought not to function as a rhetorical device which implies certain tangible promises, if these cannot be delivered. In this mode, reconciliation as a purely regulative ideal comes close to promiscuity. Perhaps at base, the promise of reconciliation is the offer of different terms of engagement, terms that are informed by and reinforce the fundamental reality of interdependence between enemy groups in every sense of the word – political, economic, social, and moral. Such terms of engagement, informed by the realisation that I need my enemy for self-realisation, and vice-versa, cannot but imply equality as well. But how does one move from a dispensation where relations were characterised by systemic racism and subjugation to a new sense of equal interdependence? South Africa, of course, took the route of "truth", which we hoped, would set us free. Truth would be our desired goal, the outcome of reconciliation that would prevent it from becoming a Faustian pact. But did it?

Whose Truth?

At the time, the South African public was heavily influenced by the rhetoric associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), with forgiveness topping the list of possible meanings attributed to reconciliation. Arguably over time another concern has usurped the emphasis on forgiveness, namely a quest for equal human dignity confronted, as we still are, by the disparity in income and inequality of access in South Africa. But although both equal dignity and forgiveness featured in the TRC's rhetoric and operations, it was the concept of truth that dominated proceedings. The TRC's aim with this compromise was to establish a national memory, a national truth-framework to assess the causes, the motives and the extent of human rights violations during apartheid, and to create a consensus to move decisively away from mass violence, whether in the form of apartheid with its structural and personal violence and ethnic cleansing or even genocide.

It is not true that the truth and reconciliation process was devoid of all justice.

The TRC did involve a measure of accountability – accounting literally for the evil deeds of the past. If the TRC imposed criminal accountability, the risk of non-participation and oblivion about what happened would have been unacceptably high. Also, in the wisdom of our founding fathers a national consensus on past atrocities would be a prize for which it would be worth making significant compromises.

What motivated this conviction? I believe it had less to do with making it easy for perpetrators in order to secure stable elections, although obviously this also played a role. The larger objective was to create a national resolve never to go back to the kinds of violent oppression that was apartheid. The aim was to make denial impossible, and to prevent mass violence from ever again becoming a real possibility.

Was it a success? When the IJR conducted a national survey in South Africa in 2001 at the conclusion of the TRC, there existed a virtually universal consensus that apartheid had been a crime against humanity: 94% of black South Africans agreed with this statement, as one could expect, but the surprise was that fully 73% of white people agreed, the very people for whose benefit the whole system had been invented. Perhaps this is why 72% of black South Africans agreed with amnesty being extended to perpetrators. The Conditional Amnesty dispensation was "profoundly distinct" from blanket amnesty or impunity, as Neil Kritz recently wrote.[1] Perpetrator testimonies supported and vindicated victims' firm belief in the horror of apartheid. The victims understood far better than their white counterparts what such violence meant and therefore the testimonies, perhaps even more importantly, reinforced their commitment that this should never happen again in their beautiful land. Truth, as this larger national consensus, became our bulwark against revenge and relapse into mass violence.

But this raises the importance of a sophisticated conceptualisation of "truth" as post-conflict consensus. It is therefore important that such consensus is shared across traditional lines, and is allowed to develop within a process of democratic contestation. Therefore, as one measures a growing awareness of a shared sense of the past, one needs to do this alongside measuring, to the extent possible, the extent of participation in a shared, though contested, process of shaping of the future. So, one needs to monitor both consensus-building and democratic contestation in the same breath. In what follows, I turn to some concrete examples of the findings I refer to.

SOUTH AFRICAN RECONCILIATION BAROMETER

This initial TRC survey was conducted with Professor Jim Gibson[2], who wrote a volume on this: "Overcoming apartheid – can Truth reconcile a divided

society" to which he answered broadly "yes". Out of this grew IJR's well-known project South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) that for the last 10 years measures attitudes towards reconciliation in a nationally-stratified sample of about 3500 individuals (across gender, race, income, geography etc) in 6 languages. It attracts much attention in South Africa, and indeed internationally as there are now similar projects in Rwanda, Australia, and possibly Kenya and Liberia. It houses an online publicly-accessible database of public opinion about matters of reconciliation over the past 10 years.

Over time, responses have changed to the degree that we will next year revise the survey in its entirety. To give an idea of the kinds of findings we produce, here are some of the 2012/13 findings[3]:

- **South Africans share in a spirit of reconciliation and unity, but disagree on the need to re-dress the material imbalance created by the past.**

  - A large majority of South Africans (83.8%) continue to agree that apartheid was a crime against humanity, and this is an important finding. Similarly high numbers (82.5%) agree that before the transition to democracy, the state was responsible for committing atrocities against anti-apartheid activists. A further 81.1% agree that the apartheid government wrongly oppressed the majority of South Africans. 55% of black and 55% white South African youth agree or strongly agree that South Africans have made progress in reconciliation since the end of apartheid and less than 10% of South African youth disagree with the statement that the TRC advanced reconciliation. Indeed, it is our observation that this consensus seems to be growing, even as there remains disagreement about how to tackle the economic legacy of apartheid.

  - It is a positive finding that 61.4% of South Africans report that the nation has progressed in terms of reconciliation and that citizens continue to agree with the tenets of reconciliation, forgiveness and unity. The majority (62%) of South Africans share in a desire to forgive those who hurt others during apartheid and 64% want to move forward from the past in unity (without much variance across racial groups).

  - One finding of the SARB that it is important to highlight is the remarkable measure of consensus which seems to exist amongst young South Africans from across society about the fact that apartheid had been a crime against humanity, an evil we would not

want to repeat in any shape or form, and that there has been progress in reconciliation since, in which the TRC had played an important role.

- A particularly pronounced split is evident in response to a question that assesses apartheid's economic legacy: whether or not black South Africans are still poor today as a result of the lasting effects of apartheid. Eighty-two percent (82.0%) of black South Africans agree that this is the case, as do 73.3% of Indian/Asian and 61.4% of coloured South Africans. Only about half (50.6%) of whites agree. This now is where South Africa needs to focus its attention to consolidate and reap the benefits of its investment in truth. To this end we track economic inclusivity as a key indicator of reconciliation in society and as a key predictor too, of the potential for future violence.

- However, when it comes to deeper issues of socio-economic transformation, reparations and redress, South Africans are divided along racial lines. For example, in terms of the statement *government should provide support to victims of gross human rights violations during apartheid*, white South Africans are much less likely to agree with this sentiment (33%), than black (62%), Indian/Asian (64%), or coloured (53%) South Africans. Similarly, in responding to the statement that *reconciliation is impossible if those who were disadvantaged under apartheid continue to be poor*, only 29% of white South Africans, compared to 58% of black South Africans, agree with this statement. In sum, all South Africans share a similar belief in and desire for reconciliation. But, white South Africans are 20-30% less likely to agree than other race groups with the need to continue to support victims of apartheid or that economic redress is required for reconciliation.

- **South Africans report that class inequality – which continues to reflect racial divisions - has become the greatest impediment to national reconciliation**.

  - Out of a list of six overarching divisive social issues, class was most commonly identified by 27.9% of South Africans surveyed, with race dropping to fourth place, at 14.6%. In sum, material inequality is the biggest obstacle to national reconciliation, but it must be noted that the majority of the materially excluded are black South Africans.

- **There is a significant decline in confidence in governance institutions and increase in citizen disillusionment.**

  - In particular, results show a drop in citizen confidence in governance institutions, especially national government (10.8% decrease since 2012), and 62.3% of South Africans feel that leaders are not concerned with people like them. This figure has jumped by 13% from 49.3% in 2012. It is of interest to note that these declines occurred in the wake of the African National Congress's (ANC) National Conference that was held in Mangaung in December 2012, and in the run-up to the 2014 general elections. The previous time that we witnessed declines of this magnitude was in 2008, following on the ANC's Polokwane conference and leading up to the 2009 general elections.

- **Current and future unemployment remains a considerable concern for South Africans**

  - SARB 2013 results demonstrates that when South Africans were asked about their prospects of finding employment compared to a year ago, 29.3% noted an improvement, compared with 34.9% who noted an improvement in 2012. In other words the percentage of South Africans who report that their employment opportunities have improved has decreased since last year by 5.6%.

- **Race relations: integration for the wealthy but exclusion for the poor.**

  - In sum, as class position improves so does the degree of inter-racial contact and socialisation, and the most socially excluded from inter-racial contact are also the materially excluded who are mainly black. These results indicate the continued legacy of geographical, social and material exclusion of the black majority engineered by the apartheid state.

This socio-economic fault line has prompted the Institute to engage in a further study, the Transformation Audit where we seek better to understand the exact causes of material exclusion.

Finally, building on this work, IJR has recently been appointed as lead agent of the Afrobarometer (AB), a survey across 34 African countries by an independent, non-partisan, African-based network of researchers.[4] It comprises a comparative series of public opinion surveys that measure public attitudes toward democracy, governance, the economy, leadership, identity, and other related issues. The **purpose** is to measure popular perspectives on the social,

political, and economic environments in each country where it is implemented
and across Africa. The **goal** is to give the public a voice in policy making
processes by providing high-quality public opinion data to policy-makers,
policy advocates and civil society organizations, academics, media, donors
and investors, and ordinary Africans.

In conclusion, from the vantage point of practices developed by the IJR,
measuring public opinion with regards to post-conflict consensus-building,
historical confrontation, redress and national unity are themselves important
steps towards rendering peace more sustainable. Not only do they provide
important information about the progress of reconciliation and peace, but
they may in fact act variously as both early warning and motivation towards
fulfilling the conditions that would make peace more sustainable. But then
important methodological questions, such as those raised at the beginning of
the chapter, need to remain firmly in focus.

Notes

[1] Kritz 2002
[2] Gibson 2004
[3] The findings are reported here as published in: Wale, 2013, accessed on 1 October 2014 at
    http://reconciliationbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/IJR-Barometer-Report-2013-
    22Nov1635.pdf.
[4] For more information, visit http://www.afrobarometer.org/

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