

## **TRAUMA HEALING AND NON-VIOLENCE WORK IN THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION**

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The African Great Lakes Region has been the theater of violent conflicts for decades, especially after the colonial period. However, the cautious observer should keep an eye on the pre-colonial and colonial period too. Civil wars, interethnic killings and the discrimination, injustices and inequality that followed had characterized the authoritarian systems that were established in each of these countries—Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Congo located in that region of Africa. The envy of power, exclusion of the other, manipulation of the rural population has been the main origin of all those atrocities. As a result, fear, hate, uncertainty of the future, mistrust, despair have been carried from one generation to another generation and feelings of vengeance and hatred have been nourished as the only way of overcoming the violent conflicts that people were experiencing. In one of our workshops, a participant shared saying, *“In 30 years to come starting from 1994, we are expecting to live another war in our country and that one would be worse even though there is no kind war.”* Frankly, this shows how the circle of violence has been rooted in people’s minds to the point that they all are convinced that this is the only way that things have to be.

Is it possible that such people learn about how to deal with violent conflicts? Can those people learn how not to destroy oneself? Is it possible again to learn about the culture of peace when you have experienced killings? Can the circle of violence in the African Great Lakes Region be broken? It is with affirmative responses to all those questions that the African Great Lakes Initiative has started to do trauma healing and non-violence work in the African Great Lakes Region.

Peace is not only a political phenomenon. Peace exists on many levels and its most basic level is at home, at school, in the office and in the street. To sustain peace on the grass roots AGLI has launched, as a priority, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and trauma healing work with local communities. On one hand, with AVP, we facilitate people to discover that in time of violent conflicts there are non-violent alternatives for them to use instead of vengeance. This has been very beneficial to people because they learn how, as people who have been or are involved in the conflicts, to look towards themselves and find out how great are the potentialities to do good that are within themselves. In that way AVP tremendously contributes in addressing people’s needs.

On the other hand, we all know how trauma destroys oneself. In these war-torn countries, almost if not all the population has been seriously traumatized. And the worst thing of it is that many of them are not aware of what trauma is and its effects. It is very dangerous when people undergo such concern without knowing it. The individual is destroyed and moreover the big injury is to the community especially in these African societies where the community idea counts more. The trauma healing work done by AGLI in this region has brought people to realize how traumatized they are and how they can cope with that psychosocial trauma and its aftermath caused by the brutal and massive devastation. This

has greatly contributed in offering to people a time to breath again. On the healing path, fear, grief, shame, suspicion go out and calm, joy, love, trust are regained. Hope is renewed, courage is remembered and life becomes meaningful. The person realizes how it still worthwhile to be a member of the community although sufferings occurred within. This is a major fact in the healing and reestablishment of the community itself because by reconnecting to themselves, people begin to rebuild the community structures based on love, justice, understanding that are very essential in their living style.

By doing trauma healing and non-violence work in the African great lakes region, AGLI is providing to people opportunities towards imaginative and responsible solution to violent conflicts without being disconnected from their culture. This is a veritable tool, which is necessary to sustainable reconciliation that needs to take place within those countries. Along with other peace efforts, AGLI wants to participate in making that part of the world a better place to live in. AGLI envisions that this process will not be a short one, but will take decades to accomplish even after the violence conflicts have been resolved.