

## Trust and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Societies

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Violent conflicts are often perceived as a complete break with the past, a disintegration of social ties, the destruction of ordinary economic activities, a loss of cultural creativity – in short: as an incisive and sometimes irreversible societal rupture. The rebuilding of society after conflict is an enormous task that, so it seems, cannot build on much except the presumption that all actors must have a shared interest in a reliable social order. It should allow all actors to make a living and to find a place in the post-conflict society. Violent peace and a lingering conflict would be the unattractive alternative.

The instruments to overcome the difficulties related to a post-conflict situation are many, and they have been the subject of highly controversial debates in the literature. Legal action, formal and informal processes of mediation, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and a wide range of other means have been used to address past injustice and the restoration of normal social relations between former belligerents. Most prominent became the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commissions set up by then President Nelson Mandela after the end of Apartheid. They served as a model for many similar institutions in other former conflict regions of Africa and beyond, for instance in Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and most recently in Côte d'Ivoire. Their uneven success conceals, however, that there are more options to rebuild society after conflict – and it also ignores the many initiatives that build on what iterated from the former social order into the post-conflict setting. Even war-torn societies do not simply disintegrate. They maintain some sort of social order – though of a different kind than a settled and regulated peaceful society.

Trust is perhaps a conceptual alternative to the conventional disintegration metaphor. Trust is generally seen as one of the major resources that is lacking in post-conflict society. But trust does not simply fade away in a violent crisis. Rather, it changes its form. While trust in institutions may diminish or even disappear, personal trust becomes more important than ever. How does this transformation of trust affect the rebuilding of society? And to what degree is it possible to foster processes of conflict transformation by building on the existing forms of trust?

This conference explores alternative views of the restructuring of social life in post-conflict societies and tries to compare different trajectories of coping with the past. It starts from the assumption that a violent crisis affects social relations deeply but does not bring them to an end. Social relations persist, albeit in different forms, so the challenge is to conceptualise alternative trajectories of societal rebuilding. The conference invites scholars from the social sciences and the humanities to think about alternative concepts that may be more adapted to the particularities of local societies than the Christian model of sin, confession and absolution.

Possible contributions to the conference should address one or several of the following issues:

- How are institutionalised processes of reconciliation perceived by the actors?
- What are the comparative advantages and shortcomings of the different forms of coping with a violent past?
- Are there conceptual or theoretical and empirical alternatives to the usual models of societal disintegration and reconciliation?

Abstracts of 250 words should be sent until **March 30, 2012** to Sandra Burri [s.burri@unibas.ch](mailto:s.burri@unibas.ch). The speakers will be notified on the acceptance of their contribution by May 31, 2012.