

Editorial

The Fight against poverty is compromised by armed conflicts

Wars and massacres, people roaming the bush and forests, famine and misery for millions of displaced persons or refugees, the destruction of social and economic infrastructures: this has been the almost universal picture in the majority of African countries for the last decade.

Bloody conflicts continue to ruin millions of lives in countries such as the Ivory Coast, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Somalia, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville and the Congo Democratic Republic etc. The horrors assailing them are all the more apparent in this day and age because of the enormous advances in the audiovisual media. Nevertheless, the Africans themselves are apparently powerless to stop the juggernaut of war as it has rolled on unremittingly during the past decade.

It has become more and more difficult, and even impossible, to pay at the same time the price for both war and peace. Ensure that African people are given an education during their entire lives, master demographic expansion, improve the quality of life, expand public participation in political life, reduce migratory flows, reduce inequalities in the distribution of wealth, affirm cultural identity, prevent damage to the environment by making substantial changes in energy consumption and urban transport, encourage local development and knowledge transfer, encourage fast and efficient judicial procedures ... none of this is possible in a war context.

For example, a country like the Congo Democratic Republic has considerable natural and human resources. The damage inflicted by the war that has been going on since 1996 in this country is incalculable: 3.5 million people have been killed, there are more than two million people displaced by the war, 18.5 million have no access to health care outside the traditional system, there are more than 10,000 child soldiers, between 800,000 and 900,000 AIDS orphans, 55% of the population have no access to drinking water, 400,000 displaced children have no access to education, 60 million people urgently require food aid, etc. The Congo is currently 152nd on the list of countries classified using the UNDP development index. This is a fall of 12 places compared to 1992.

Another example, as dramatic as it is tragic, is that of Rwanda. In 1994, this country witnessed a genocide which resulted in the deaths of one million of its inhabitants. In Sudan, the conflict has been particularly hard on the women and children who have had to deal with a famine that has become endemic. In Sierra Leone and Angola, landmines have crippled thousands.

More generally, the wars on our continent have resulted in direct and indirect costs for all the countries concerned: the direct costs of the war consist of the damage to the social and economic infrastructures with social capital, the breakdown of commercial networks and the destruction of crops. The disparities are becoming intolerable and are resulting in the subjugation and the domination of our countries by others. The history of the twentieth century is one of amazing scientific and technological progress which has scarcely benefited the vast majority of Africans, whose lives are spent in appalling misery. The indirect costs consist of inflation, an increasing foreign debt, the abuse of labour for military purposes, the decline in private sector investment etc.

During this past century, we have learnt how to diagnose and cure numerous illnesses that result in suffering and death. The speed and precision of human communications have reached an extraordinary level. We have instant and unlimited information at our disposal. All this progress is beyond the reach of the

overwhelming majority of African people because of the conflicts, of which the leaders of the South are mere instruments, with the people being only victims.

How can we stop this waste? How can we surmount the causes of these wars: the ethnic tensions, the social exclusion and the inequalities, the poverty, the competition for rare and limited resources, the competition for land, the religious differences, the oppression and the dictatorships, the border conflicts, the damage to the environment and the demographic pressures, etc... How can we bring Africa and other ACP countries into the debates about the stakes of globalisation? When will we be finally able to implement our commitments to the partners of the European Union under the Cotonou Agreement if we are forced to spend all our time destroying life and the conditions for life in our own backyard?

The settlement of all these conflicts is too serious a matter to be left solely to politicians or the military. The time has come for the organisations of civil society to rally all those with a love of justice and peace make an in-depth examination of the conflicts on the continent and to propose the ways and means of their settlement. We must also establish the foundations of future mechanisms for preventing new conflicts and for consolidating peace.

How can we establish and consolidate peaceful thinking? How can we commit our entire human community to a unanimous repudiation of violence? How can we move from a culture of war to a culture of peace in which everybody cooperates? What new approach is required on the global, regional (African), sub-regional and national scales? What can be done to make our armies guardians of democratic stability and public protection? How can our ministries of war and defence be progressively transformed into ministries of peace? All these challenges require a response. They all deserve serious and profound discussion and analysis during the work of this important conference.

Some of these questions were the subject of a major debate at the first African Social Forum in Bamako in January 2002. We must therefore continue along the path already stippled out to define the real involvement of civil society in the conflicts rending Africa and holding her back. We must play our part in the

analysis of these conflicts, in informing our fellow citizens about these conflicts and in managing them so that a definitive and enduring settlement can be achieved.

We need fair laws that are fairly applied. We need a democracy specific to our culture and a participative development as a basis for this enduring peace. And to put these three corner-stones in place, a facilitating role for civil society is now indispensable.

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