

# Opportunities and Challenges of South-South Partnership:

Reflections on a Collaborative Research Project on Violence  
and Transition in Africa

Hugo van der Merwe (CSVR), Nicky Rousseau (CHR),  
Naana Marekia (NPI-Africa), Pamela Machakanja (IPLG)  
and Eunice Bere (IPLG)



**NPI-Africa**

A Peace Resource Organisation



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**CSVR**

The Centre for the Study of  
Violence and Reconciliation

## Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

CSVV, established in 1989, adopts a multidisciplinary approach to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects, and build sustainable peace locally, continentally, and globally. CSVV's work includes a focus on transitional justice, peacebuilding, criminal justice reform, trauma studies and support, victim empowerment, and violence prevention, with a specific focus on the prevention of gender-based, youth, and collective violence. The organisation is increasingly working on a pan-continental basis to share expertise, facilitate learning exchanges, and strengthen the capacity of Africa's civil society and regional organisations.

## Centre for Humanities Research

The CHR provides a meeting point for researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences from across the globe through a vibrant postdoctoral programme. The CHR strives to develop unifying and interdisciplinary themes in the humanities that will enable a renewal of its study in Africa. Through a series of focused research projects on law and violence, aesthetics and politics, anti-racism and the critique of race, and the postcolonial university in Africa, the CHR strives to contribute to national and international debates on the role of the humanities in unraveling the legacies of apartheid and colonialism.

## Institute for Peace, Leadership & Governance

The Institute for Peace Leadership & Governance (IPLG) has risen to the challenge that a new kind of training is required to prepare the future leaders of Africa to deal with the shifting dynamics emerging from the social, political and economic challenges of the new millennium. IPLG trains participants to develop ways to prevent and resolve conflict and to sustain global peace, and to this end offers post-graduate degrees, diplomas and certificates.

## Nairobi Peace Initiative - Africa

NPI-Africa is a Pan African resource organization committed to the promotion of peaceful transformation of conflict and reconciliation in Africa. Its strategies include direct initiation of processes, capacity building and accompaniment of other organizations, individuals, communities and processes of peace-building.

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## Introduction

This report reflects on the experience four South-based organisations in conducting collaborative research on violence and transition in Africa. It explores some of the challenges and opportunities offered by working collaboratively on common themes across different contexts with research partners with diverse goals and institutional arrangements, and seeks to draw some lessons for how such partnerships can benefit individual organisations and research on violence more generally. This report seeks to capture some of the process lessons, while the findings of the research are reported elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The report is based on the final project meeting where partners engaged in a joint reflection on more than three years of collaboration.

## The Growth of South-South Partnerships

South-South partnerships have become a popular focus of development and research collaboration. Both as an avenue to promote theoretical and practical understanding of social challenges among countries in the South, and as a way of building networks to strengthen capacity to use this knowledge to promote social change, South-South partnerships hold great promise. Athar Osama (2007: 2) notes that:

While most international collaborations ... are primarily between sets of developed and developing countries (i.e. North-South collaborations), scientific collaboration and cooperation between countries of the South itself (i.e. South-South collaborations) are often overlooked. The latter, which have only recently begun to emerge, can be equally fruitful avenues for scientific capacity building in the South.

He goes on to quote from a study by the United Kingdom's Office of Science and Innovation (2007) which found that scientific papers co-authored by researchers from different countries received a greater number of citations ... than those authored by multiple researchers from a single country.

Participation in international collaborative research is however very unevenly distributed. While peer reviewed scientific publications using at least one international co-author increased from 9 to 26 percent between 1988 and 2005 (NSF 2007), where South-based authors collaborate

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<sup>1</sup> See the respective websites of the partner organisations.

with international partners, these are usually North-South rather than South-South collaborations.<sup>2</sup> International collaboration holds the danger of simply reinforcing existing imbalances in knowledge development.<sup>3</sup>

Key goals driving the increased South-South collaboration, according to Osama (2008) are: (a) to enable these countries to work together to address some of the problems that they may have in common, (b) to broaden the overall opportunities for researchers in developing countries, and (c) to provide opportunity for developing country researchers to help other developing country researchers develop an indigenous capacity to generate, manage, and utilize science and technology to address their needs.

South-South research collaborations also have their own challenges that need to be understood, and the benefits need to be weighed against what could be found through pursuing North-South collaborations.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this potential and proliferation of collaborative projects, “there is a general dearth of systematic thinking on, and deep understanding of, the basic issues and challenges that have constrained the growth of this idea” (ibid: 7). This report seeks to start addressing this gap and to engage with these issues through reflection on what motivated, what opportunities were discovered and what challenges were experienced in the case of one such South-South collaborative project.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A review of collaborative research in SADC by Nelius Boshoff found that “only 3% of SADC papers during 2005–2008 were jointly authored by researchers from two or more SADC countries (intra-regional collaboration), and only 5% of SADC papers were jointly authored with researchers from African countries outside the SADC (continental collaboration). In contrast, 47% of SADC papers were co-authored with scientists from high-income countries. The few instances of intra-regional and continental collaboration in the SADC are largely the product of North–South collaboration. Authors from high-income countries are included in 60% of intra-regional co-authored papers and in 59% of continental co-authored papers.”

<sup>3</sup> A UN study found that high-income countries spend roughly 1.5 to 3.8 per cent of their GDP on research and development (R&D) and fund more than 80 per cent of the world’s R&D activities. In contrast, most developing countries spend less than 0.5 per cent of their GDP on R&D activities and some developing countries spend as low as 0.01 per cent (UNCSTD, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Although the benefits assumed in North-South collaboration should be treated with some scepticism particularly when it relates to the fields of peace building and transitional justice. Osama (2008:6) for example argues that such collaborations “not only leads to transfer of knowledge and international best practice, but also improves their chances of getting published in high-quality journals of international repute. This motivation may be considerably weakened when scientists are required to work with other scientists of the same level of international standing, as is likely to be the case in many South-South collaborations.”

<sup>5</sup> Another example of such reflective case study of critical reflection through collaboration among South-based partners is documented by Mncwabe (2010)

## Development of a Collaborative Project

The Violence in Transition Project was a joint research project among four organisations in three African countries: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) and Centre for Humanities Research at University of Western Cape (CHR) in South Africa, Institute for Peace, Leadership and Governance (IPLG) in Zimbabwe and the Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI-Africa) in Kenya.<sup>6</sup> The project objectives were to explore the changing nature and dynamics of violence in countries undergoing political transition, and to use these insights to address policy and community intervention challenges for preventing future violence.

The research emerged out of a CSVR project that examined the changing patterns of violence in South Africa. This research asked questions about the uniqueness of the findings to South Africa and suggested comparable and comparative research be conducted to examine these issues in greater depth. This gave rise to discussions with various regional organisations on the utility and feasibility of such research and the development of a partnership proposal being shared with IPLG and NPI-Africa. When the details of the research methodology were clarified, CHR was also approached to join the partnership.

The project identified common themes that could be examined in the three countries, and which would benefit from some comparative analysis. After extensive discussion, gender violence and informal armed formations (IAFs) were chosen as research foci. These were issues that were viewed as central in addressing ongoing policy debates that partner organisations faced in their respective countries. The specific definition and parameters of both these topics were left somewhat open to local articulation.

NPI-Africa: It had been anticipated that armed formations, specifically youth formations/armed groups not 'properly' demobilized will predictably be the most significant actors in manifesting violent conflict in Southern and Eastern Africa. Therefore a nuanced understanding of how they are formed, how they operate, their ideology, what can be done to successfully disarm them and so on was seen to be important in preventing violence during periods of transition. ... It was clear, at least for NPI-Africa, that IAFs were most

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<sup>6</sup> Funding for the project was provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which strongly supported the commitment of the project partners in reflecting on their experiences and documenting the lessons drawn from working together.

active during elections, and were getting more 'creative and innovative' with their methods of conflict. It consequently became important to carry out research on these groups to inform policy, so that key recommendations could be made to prevent violence during subsequent elections/periods of transition.

IPLG: IPLG as an organisation was interested in violence and transitional justice as research themes. While the concept of informal armed formations was not familiar to us, we were very interested in examining the role of youth militias - Zimbabwean youth who were involved in state sponsored violence. Through literature and ongoing political crisis in Zimbabwe we also understood and worked with the assumption that political transitions ranging from elections, to peace agreements often serve as triggers of violence, hence the need to increase our knowledge and understanding about these issues.

CHR: Well, there had been a fairly longstanding interest in questions of violence among some of my colleagues and our students - for example, the 'War and the Everyday' series of workshops and colloquiums - so this project offered the possibility of taking some of these issues further.

## Engaging with Broad Concepts through Local Lenses

This joint articulation of broader themes provided the opportunity for the partners to engage in international debates about key concepts and processes (TJ, DDR, gender violence, transition, etc) in terms of local experiences. While taking the international literature and policy developments into account, the project sought to ground its understanding of these issues in how they are locally experienced. The research approach sought to avoid imposing conceptualisations that come with specific agendas or with pre-conceived ideas about the nature of violence and how it was to be addressed.

NPI-Africa: Exploring different country-specific uses of terms helped to build a more nuanced understanding of definitions, e.g. transition and what it means in our context. Are

we using terms that have been handed to us by the West without sufficient local interpretation?

CSV: We were concerned that TJ has been a narrow framing of problems of transformation in South Africa, and we were now engaging with other African countries on TJ. We found that the same concerns about the continuities in violence were being faced by these countries. This continuity of violence after transition is not just because of shortcomings of specific TJ processes. Simply working on a TJ framework or setting up conventional TJ mechanisms was not enough. We needed a research approach that would look at a shift from spectacular interventions and short-term quick-fix TJ solutions to longer term engagement with more deeply rooted forms of violence.

IPLG: The concept of transition is viewed differently by people. There was the realisation that we were dealing with socially constructed and contested phenomena of 'violence' 'transition', 'informal armed formation' which would call for the use of different lenses in terms of analysis and interpretation within a specific contextual framework.

CHR: We were interested in rethinking the question of transition and transitional justice from a different vantage point rather than the more predictable set of critiques that had emerged around whether the TRC had delivered, the discourse of reconciliation and its relationship to nation-building.

By framing the research around common themes with broad parameters for how these were defined, it allowed the partners to examine these in terms of their specific local manifestations and policy constraints.

## Bridging the Academic-Practitioner Divide

Both the focus of the research and the nature of the individual partners provided an opportunity to overcome the traditional academic-practitioner divide. The topics chosen were explored within the



context of the international conceptual debates, but also located within the specific local policy and intervention challenges. The partnership was constituted of both academically based (IPLG and CHR) and policy/practitioner based (CSVN and NPI-Africa) civil society organisations.

CHR: The themes of violence and transition seemed to potentially provide the possibility of bringing a greater sense of politics to academic discussions on violence and a wider interest in trying to bridge the apparent divide between academic and practitioner work.

IPLG: For us there were already efforts to look for partners working on the dynamics of violence and transitional justice as a way of developing our research agenda. The need to get involved was also motivated by the need to link the classroom theory with what happens in the field. Partnering with organisations or field practitioners made a lot sense for our research agenda-linking theory with practice.

Combining academic and NGO institutions meant that each was challenged to build its capacity in relation to particular spheres of engagement, some being challenged to recruit research capacity, while others were stretched in terms of engaging policy makers. The involvement of academic institutions was also seen as offering some level of status or credibility for the research for NGOs involved in contested policy debates:

NPI-Africa: The collaboration with academic institutions (AU and UWC) enriched and perhaps gave legitimacy to the research aspect of the project.

Addressing this divide was for some partners a strategic move, which allowed them to build new capacity that would be carried into future work, particularly in terms of new skills and new staffing.

## Building Organisational Links and Networks

Project partners all emphasised the importance of building and maintaining institutional relationships among African civil society organisations, and the significance of personal networks in initiating and strengthening these. Seeking out collaborative relationships that contribute to

internal capacity and effectiveness thus remains an organisational priority. Building on existing bonds was a key element of this process.

IPLG: I happened to have attended the same university as George Wachira (the initial project leader at NPI-Africa), University of Bradford in the United Kingdom and the project reinforced the personal relationship that was already there. George contacted me at IPLG and talked about the possibility of working with CSVR and by this time one of our students was already interning with CSVR in the area of transitional justice. IPLG did not hesitate accepting the offer.

CHR: The CHR has previously hosted a number of students and colleagues from Zimbabwe and Kenya mainly in the area of museum and heritage work, so this presented an opportunity for us to build on these networks. Many of our institutions in South Africa were completely isolated from the continent in the past, so it's important to pay attention to building such networks.

These connections were not only based on relationships, but also drew on a shared intellectual base and orientation. Research done by each of the organisations was being utilised and built upon by the others.

IPLG: Some of our graduate students whose topics were in the area of violence, peace and peace-building got interested in the work that CSVR was doing. When this was brought to our attention we learned more about the organisation and realised that we were working in areas of common interest. This encouraged us wanting to build a partnership on internship but with a long term view of building a partnership in the area of transitional justice, violence and peace building.

CSV: Our previous engagement with IPLG through hosting an intern, and with NPI-Africa through assisting them with their research on transitional justice, were both rewarding and made us enthusiastic about further collaboration. Their intellectual agendas seemed closely aligned with ours.

In a growing international field that is largely dominated by north-based organisations, the intellectual symmetry of South-based partners proved very attractive.

NPI-Africa: Making country contrasts and taking this diversity into account helps in defining an 'African agenda' as opposed to borrowing from and trying to put into practice what has been written about Africa from the West.

CHR: Yes, as one of my colleagues always says, it's important to challenge the notion that theory happens elsewhere and the continent is just a field site for testing and elaborating theory.

## Collaboration as a Space to Reflect on Frameworks and Approaches

Collaboration provided space and comparative perspectives that encourage introspection about each organisation's own conception of key concepts and approaches to engaging with issues of violence.

IPLG: As an institute engaged in knowledge creation and creating spaces for deep thinking the project helped in questioning our conceptualization of violence and its manifestations, informal armed formations and how they are created given the multiple layers of actors involved and the levels at which the violence was experienced by different people. In Zimbabwe while the notion of violence was heavily state-centric it also allowed us to use other lenses of understanding violence in both the public and the private sphere. This allowed us to analyse the extent to which vulnerabilities are gendered and instrumentalized within the different moments of transition, thereby creating other layers of complexity.

CSV: We have used the project to explore new ways of engaging with key challenges in conceptualising causes of violence. While concepts of structural violence have been part of our framing of how we understand violence, the research allowed us to look at its application in more concrete ways.

Similarly, the collaboration challenged the partners to reflect on their research methodologies and approach:

NPI-Africa: The research called for deeper thinking and understanding of how research is done in our context for it to be most useful.

CHR: Some of us had been influenced by the view that we sometimes move too hastily towards trying to understand the causes of violence, and in doing so we sometimes explain away violence. - or to put it differently, the violence disappears. So we were keen to pay attention and to listen carefully which also required a different methodological and ethical sensibility. We spent a huge amount of time thinking and talking about the interviews - not to find 'the truth' but really to stay with them and think about how interviewees (and ourselves) 'framed and named' violence. It raised really interesting issues - for example, a research meeting turned into a very 'hot' debate about discipline, punishment and violence!

In a field where inter-disciplinary approaches have become standard, the models for knowledge generation and interpretation are contested. Exploring new methodologies or borrowing methodologies from other fields is critical in developing a better understanding of violence and how it can be prevented.

## Country Comparative Insights

Through regular sharing of research developments and collaboration around an integrative comparative report, the project sought to encourage insights from the various similarities and contrasts that emerged between the research sites. The extent of similarities were quite striking, at least in terms of broad political contexts.

IPLG: The set of events leading to the political crisis and power-sharing in Zimbabwe certainly show striking similarities with other regional contexts: closely contested elections, former opposition gaining parliamentary majorities, election results being contested, the ruling party confirming itself in power despite widespread reports of vote-fixing, intimidation and outright violence.

These parallels also extended to issues of the role of the state in “informal” violence, and the ongoing influence of ethnic identity as a mobilising force. Contrasts between Zimbabwe and Kenya on the one hand and South Africa on the other, presented some important differences in the nature of violence.

NPI-Africa: Making comparisons with the SA context was rather difficult because the same dynamics did not necessarily always apply, unlike Kenya and Zimbabwe which are rather similar. However this gave opportunity for wider analysis and thinking about what violence and transition means for a country like S.A which has a different ‘independence story’ that most other African countries.

CHR: Yes, but perhaps that was because we were focusing on the recent period and thus ended up looking at different sides of transition? In Zimbabwe and Kenya recent violence precedes the current transition, whereas the violence in South Africa at the moment is nearly two decades after the transition from white minority rule. If South Africa had been looking at the violence leading up to elections in 1994, there would have been much more resonance. Perhaps apartheid itself, and the very long experience of colonialism, are aspects that are different and shouldn’t be lost, especially in relation to violence.

CSVR: A key contrast that we had to reflect on was that of the ethnic dimension. In South Africa this was not a resource for politicians in terms of state capture by certain ethnic groups or certain groups being marginalised, but the discourse on race in identity formation and political mobilisation remains critical.

The specific transitional model employed in South Africa also provided a basis for contrast and comparisons:

IPLG: The differences with South Africa is that while Apartheid dominated colonial politics, the transition to post-independence was characterised by symbols of accommodation and co-option which have persisted with possibilities of different consequences. South Africa’s efforts to accommodate the diverse groups have helped the country to be represented as a strong democracy – a situation which in the context of transitional violence is contested and

raises questions of sustainability – questions with direct relevance for models in other countries.

A common colonial heritage and the consequent state formation process however was noted as a factor in shaping the history of violence in all three contexts:

IPLG: The Zimbabwean situation of state formation through the liberation movements in many ways seem to be similar to the Kenyan and South Africa case. This model of state formation in many ways influence patterns of violence especially where the state power and legitimacy seem threatened. The dominance of the political power by one political party whose role and functions are heavily legitimised by the military seems to perpetuate different forms of violence and impunity.

## Local Adaptation of Research Methodology

The common usage of life histories, focus groups and in-depth interviews using open ended questions allowed for local nuances to be explored and for this to form the focus of the study. The goal of comparative analysis did not drive the collection of local data.

CHR: We agreed that this wasn't going to be a tight comparative study given the time constraints and different approaches, and this agreement did allow local teams to move ahead in relation to what worked best for them. So in South Africa, we worked with life histories rather than the ethnomethodological used by Kenya and Zimbabwe as that was what we were more familiar with and because of our interest in subjectivity. We did a much smaller number of interviews, but spent considerable time working through the interviews, with numerous transcript discussions. This was part of trying to grapple with how violence was understood and 'made sense of' by the different parties - ourselves, those we interviewed and other scholars. This made our work worthwhile, but it did make the comparative work tougher!

NPI-Africa: The three studies used comparative points of intersection; learning from each other and opportunities to exchange. The most interesting comparative discussions

happened at the workshops – it is during these meetings that the key comparative moments were most clearly defined. The discussions provided different perspectives on each country study. In other words, different perceptions and nuances of the research question between the partner countries worked to our benefit.

IPLG: The narrative approach became a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process as well as being a mode for representing people's views and interpretations. Another key feature of the qualitative narrative approach was the collaboration process between researchers, informants and partners as we co-created meanings. Stories of experience were shaped through focus group discussions and dialogue. Various local factors shaped particular methods used:

IPLG: The methodology allowed a free flow of information in a conversational manner. Informants had the opportunity to tell their stories about their life experiences. We were guided by the literature gaps on violence and transition. We also targeted hot spots of violence and marginalised communities. There were generational nuances, the older people wanted to give narrative accounts and yet the younger were more interactive in focus group discussions. The geo-specific contexts of violence and transition and the rural urban dichotomy also influenced the methodology. Some semi structured interviews were held with politicians and government officials.

## Negotiating Partnership Challenges

Critical challenges to the project which strained organisational relations were addressed through open communication and commitment building lasting relationships and equality of partners. These included the departure of the lead project staff member at one organisation, and the addition of the fourth partner to the collaboration. Each presented a challenge to how the roles and responsibilities of partnership operate, but were addressed speedily through frank and open communication via email and phone.

Communications between partners was an ongoing challenge and skype meetings were not successful due to technical problems and low internet speed. Regular email communication and sharing of reports was more effective, but still had its limitations. Face to face meetings happened during the project development phase (although not with all four partners at the same time), during the planning phase, during analysis and in the final wrap up. These meetings were critical in shaping the approach, the ideas and the relationships which were at the core of the project. Without this engagement, it would not have been a partnership that could produce the space for engagement and learning outlined above. It was however felt that more such opportunities would have been very beneficial.

IPLG: The relationship between partners was very mutual and helpful because of user friendly environment of interaction. Communication through skype was problematic due to weak network systems especially in the case of Zimbabwe. There could have been more face to face interactions which generated a lot of debate and questions were clarified. The sudden departure of the partner's project manager took all by surprise but the partners benefited a lot from each other's contributions and support.

NPI-Africa: The workshops were extremely useful and insightful, but we would have liked more face to face conversations between managers, and also the researchers needed to have more meetings to give them opportunities to share information, and experiences from the field.

## South-South Learning Partnerships

While all three partners engage regularly in collaborations with north-based institutions and find these relationships rewarding, engagement with other African institutions contains particular value. Creating spaces for sharing experiences on a more equal footing, and engaging with international debates from similar sceptical viewpoints, was both empowering and challenging. While sensitivities towards external criticism are unavoidable, spaces for opening up debates and building trust-based partnerships was deeply valued by all the partners.



As conveyed in various parts of the report, the significance of working in partnership with other South-based organisations in a joint venture that was collaboratively designed and implemented was deeply rewarding. The opportunity to invest in such collaborative project development and (at least to some extent) in face-to-face exchanges was made possible through partnering with a funder (IDRC) who explicitly prioritises capacity building as a key outcome of research projects. Most research projects are handled in a much more competitive manner, where haste in project design, efficiency in implementation and predictability of outputs severely curtails opportunities for true partnership and a project process that encourages learning, reflection and creativity.

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