

Church-Based Rural Development: RDIS, Rwanda

John Wesley Kabango¹

Overview

Organization: Rural Development Interdiocesan Service (RDIS), Episcopal Church of Rwanda

Project Description: Church-based integrated rural development

Issues: mobilising the church, rural development, reconciliation, integral mission

Context

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda left the government, the church and the international community with a number of formidable challenges. With nearly a million people killed in the space of three months, the social fabric of the country was destroyed, the economy left in ruins, and natural and human resources seriously depleted. The genocide decimated the professional and educated classes. Rwanda was already one of the world's poorest countries before the genocide and the events of 1994 led to a catastrophic increase in poverty, with 70 percent of households below the poverty line. Many women are heading households because their husbands were killed or are in prison.

An estimated of 130,000 detainees accused of genocide are incarcerated in overcrowded prisons. The government and the judicial system have been concerned by this problem and a participatory justice process is being organized where by the detainees are going to be taken on their villages to be judged by the community members.

More than 90 percent of the population, obliged to cultivate shrinking plots of land of declining quality, is dependent on agriculture for their existence. Yet the agricultural sector is constrained by structural problems: declining soil productivity, low use of appropriate inputs and excessive state intervention in favour of cash crops (coffee and tea). One serious problem in the aftermath of the genocide is the shortage of farming labour. Moreover, in the past few years, Rwanda has suffered from poor harvests provoked by El Nino.

Life expectancy is 48 years compared with an average of 54 in sub-Saharan Africa. Infant mortality is 125 per thousand births. One in every four infants is malnourished. Eleven percent of the rural population and twelve percent of the urban population is thought to be HIV positive. The infection of 12 to 14 year-olds has increased sharply.

Less than 50 percent of the population has access to safe water. Most of the water systems, including water catchments areas, were either destroyed or deteriorated during the war and genocide.

There have been serious contradictions in the positions of both the Roman Catholic and protestant church in Rwanda. The moral authority of the Christian religion has

¹ This paper also appears in *Justice, Mercy and Humility*, ed. Tim Chester, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003)

been systematically undermined by the readiness of some leaders to make accommodations with the powers that prepared the genocide. There is a strong feeling across the country that the church must be re-born. Rwanda, the church included, has adopted a culture of not admitting the wrongdoing and mistakes of the past, the present nor, I fear, of the future. The church in Rwanda has fallen victim to a culture of silence and fear.

Description

The Rural Development Interdiocesan Service (RDIS) owes its existence to the desire of the four dioceses of the Episcopal Church in Rwanda (Butare, Cyangugu, Kigeme and Shyogwe) to work for the development of the poorest of the poor. Activities include evangelism, teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation, animal husbandry, food production, micro-enterprise development, fisheries, bee-keeping and tree nurseries.

The vision of RDIS is 'a holy soul in a healthy body' with a focus on the person as a whole. We believe that people oppressed by economic, social and political systems should appeal to God to intervene in order that their rights be restored (Psalm 146:7-9). God's justice concerns social relationships and aims at creating an egalitarian community in which the basic needs of all classes of people are met. RDIS believes that committed Christians with the ability to access basic needs will sustain the church's activities. It is our conviction that the church holds the key to the real development of life in Rwanda and that God is longing to use its ministry to transform the physical, spiritual and social lives of ordinary people and the environment in which they live.

RDIS is set up to help the church use its land to build the spiritual and material life of rural communities. Church land is not simply an opportunity to earn money, but more importantly a God-given place to meet ordinary people, understand their needs and care for their immediate needs and show that Jesus Christ has the answer to their deepest needs.

Christian development does not mean organizations, buildings or projects, but building up mature Christians and teaching them skills to improve the quality of their lives and communities. We have encouraged participatory processes to take place with the aim of implementing projects that reflect as much as possible the involvement and participation of the community at the grassroots.

RDIS operates through church structures and the church has been instrumental in enabling RDIS achieve its objective. It has provided office accommodation, land to establish demonstration centres and venues for meetings and training. Pastors and catechists have provided advice, fostering holistic ministry through their preaching and daily activities, promoted outreach to vulnerable groups and supported the work through fellowship and prayer. And some have become development animators trained by RDIS.

Results

Development activities such as farming associations provide a context for evangelism and reconciliation. There is a need to extend this work to embrace the entire community, addressing the needs of the 'poorest of the poor'. The animators and the group leaders currently lack reconciliation and counselling skills to enable them address peace-building issues and handle trauma cases in the groups. RDIS is encouraging and facilitating the process of group formation through training sessions.

RDIS is attempting to increase food production at household level. Nearly 6,000 families have benefited from demonstration centres which have been established in the four dioceses. These have encouraged food security through the introduction of non-traditional hunger crops, drought crops and quick nature crops.

Since 1994 there has been a massive destruction of trees for firewood and construction which threatens to have a long-term impact on the environment and contribute to the prolonged drought. In response RDIS has established seven nursery beds in the four dioceses.

Impact

The meeting of the farming associations provide an opportunity for praying, praising and sharing faith in addition to being together as a family. Many groups assisted show indications of unity, ethnic mix, integration and a shared focus on the improving their lives. The emphasis on spiritual revival has enhanced awareness among the members of their situation and the need to put all their problems before God.

Evangelism and reconciliation interventions have provided an opportunity for the community members to meet and build trust. Acts of compassion to the vulnerable are evident in the groups. RDIS witnesses groups of people making bricks to build a house for the homeless, widows or orphans. Contributions for medical bills, food for the vulnerable and sharing of seeds can be seen in many groups. And there is evidence of increased participation in church activities.

Evaluation

The churches in Rwanda need to sharpen their commitment to caring and comforting individuals and families as our loved ones. Families are torn apart and marriages are failing. I believe that healthy families will produce healthy societies. The task of the Christians will be to find ways to heal this brokenness around us. Our church leaders will require refresher courses to help them stand at the forefront of the new struggle facing churches today. They will need to read the signs of the times and interpret them to the churches, to society and to those in authority. Christian values and the prophetic voices of the churches were not stilled in the past. They must remain strong in the future if the churches are to contribute to genuine integral mission.

Let us walk in the light of God in obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This implies that we as the church:

- shall have courage to persuade people
- shall present ourselves fearless before people so they develop pride and respect in us
- shall be compelled by Christ's love for him

- shall allow the process of renewal and prophetic obedience to God
- shall have creative love that controls life
- shall be prepared to renounce popularity for the sake of the risen Christ
- shall develop a long-term, millennium vision leading to a joint, united ministry focusing on eternity,
- shall engage in matters that please God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit