

From the Ashes of War: Women and Reconstruction

The United Nations defines “major wars” as military conflicts inflicting 1,000 battlefield deaths per year. In 1965, there were 10 major wars under way. In 1992, there were 50, with another 84 “lesser” conflicts ongoing. Although the number of major wars dropped to 25 in 1997, the millennium will nevertheless end with much of the world consumed in armed conflict or cultivating an uncertain peace.

Most of these are civil or “intrastate” wars, fueled as much by racial, ethnic, or religious animosities as by ideological fervor. Most victims are civilians, a feature that distinguishes modern conflicts. During World War I, civilians made up fewer than 5 percent of all casualties. Today, 75 percent or more of those killed or wounded in wars are non-combatants.

Developing countries in East Asia, Central America, and Africa have been consumed in civil war in recent years, as have the more industrialized countries of the former Republic of Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. Frequently accompanied by genocide, terror, and systematic rape, these conflicts impose unique hardships on these countries.

USAID has a long history of helping meet the immediate humanitarian needs of countries emerging from civil wars. It has far less experience bridging the gap between short-term humanitarian assistance and the longer term agenda of sustainable development.

USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), created in 1994, is working in more than a dozen countries throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development assistance in post-civil war societies. One of the more important lessons to be learned from OTI’s work is that gender plays a crucial, often defining role in the transition from war to peaceful development.

Although many OTI projects include activities that assist women in meeting the needs of their families and communities, the Women in Transition (WIT) Initiative, under way in Rwanda since 1995, is the only project by an international donor organization designed specifically to deliver development resources to women.

Relying on the active participation of program beneficiaries, the modestly budgeted initiative is helping strengthen Rwanda’s still fragile peace. By assisting Rwandan women to overcome the burdens of genocidal warfare and the barriers of custom, tradition, and law, WIT is helping lay the foundation for sustainable development.

The effectiveness of WIT suggests that similar initiatives can enhance USAID’s efforts in other war-ravaged nations. The Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) is now exploring this possibility. In tandem with OTI, CDIE has conducted an extensive joint evaluation of the WIT initiative. CDIE is also reviewing post-war reconstruction in countries throughout the developing world to determine how women and women’s organizations have contributed to meeting these countries’ immediate needs while improving their prospects for sustainable development in the years ahead.

The objective of CDIE’s case studies is to help frame a coherent policy for USAID missions and other development donors working to restart the engines of

development in societies emerging from civil war and genocide.

The WIT Initiative: War, Women, and Renewal

Rwanda is a small central African country of 8 million with a history of civil war between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes that dates back 40 years. Conflict erupted most recently in the summer of 1994, as the Hutu-dominated military undertook a campaign to exterminate the Tutsi. Within a few short months, between 600,000 and 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered. Three million Rwandans, mostly Tutsi women and children, fled the fighting, with 2 million seeking asylum in neighboring countries and another million remaining in Rwanda as “internally displaced persons.” The conflict subsided when Tutsi forces routed much of the Hutu army, which along with civilians left the country en masse. They are only now returning to Rwanda.

Most Rwandans are rural subsistence farmers living in scattered homesteads near their fields. The episodic nature of Rwanda’s protracted civil war has driven families from their homes and fields in search of sanctuary. There they have often stayed, and other families have begun cultivating the same fields.

Now, successive generations of Rwandan refugees are returning to find their homes destroyed or occupied by others whose own homes have been destroyed. Farmland, a precious possession in this mountainous region, is often the focus of multiple, conflicting claims by different families, all of whom are con-vinced of their legitimate right to the small plots that are essential to their survival.

More than one-third of all Rwandan households are headed by women, most of whom are war widows. Many others are wives

whose husbands are in jail awaiting trial, accused of participating in the genocide. Women have only recently won the legal right to inherit property, but even widows willing to assert legal claims to their husbands’ fields typically have lacked the tools, seeds, and livestock needed to make a living.

Not surprisingly, 70 percent of the population in post-war Rwanda live in poverty. More than 10 percent of all households depend on food assistance for survival, and food shortages are chronic in some of the country’s 12 prefectures. Housing is in short supply, and the combination of housing shortages, food shortages, and poverty exacerbate ethnic animosities, especially between Tutsi war widows and the Hutu wives of soldiers accused of participating in the genocide.

Working with the USAID mission in Rwanda, OTI conceived and designed the WIT initiative to help the country meet its basic needs for food and shelter by targeting resources directly to women and women’s groups. A five-year initiative with a budget of \$5.2 million, WIT has been active in 92 communes and has funded 1,645 projects.

Although program professionals administer the initiative, recipient groups plan and implement activities that meet their own priorities. These groups are made up of men and women, but they must have women officers. A majority of the group must be widows, and preference is accorded to widows caring for war orphans. WIT provides small grants and loans to support these activities, but members also must contribute labor, cash, or materials to the effort.

Home-building projects, which represent 40 percent of WIT’s budget, are a good example of its cost-sharing approach. The

initiative typically provides tin roofing material, wood framing, doors, windows, and adobe, but not cement, cook stoves, or latrines. The women provide labor and other materials. Seventy-one women’s associations have participated in WIT-supported home-building projects that are sheltering close to 12,000 beneficiaries at an average cost of \$800 per home.

Microenterprise investments account for a quarter of the WIT budget and concentrate on women’s cooperatives that market agricultural products. With funding from WIT, women have become active in a wide array of undertakings, from cattle trading, hide trading, and butcher shops, to honey production, baking, brick making, and tailoring. Handicrafts, pottery, and shop keeping have proven viable.

More than 800 women’s associations, with a total of 68,000 members, have benefited from WIT’s microenterprise support. These funds are “conditional grants.” Associations agree to repay the principal to women’s communal funds, local revolving funds that continue to support future economic development activities.

At the same time, to help the country meet its immediate needs, WIT has provided 530 associations with crop seeds, farm tools, and livestock. When the livestock, most often goats, reproduce, the offspring are distributed to association members who did not share in the initial distribution, thus ensuring the widest possible distribution of WIT’s benefits.

Although these material improvements are very important to the lives of women and their communities, WIT also is helping integrate women’s groups into the public life of their country. WIT associations are helping identify

local needs, set local priorities, and develop a consensus about the future direction of local development.

This experience will prove to be vital to Rwanda's future. In the past, local officials were appointed by the central government in Kigali. The country is now establishing villages for resettling its people, and democratically elected communal councils will oversee local government. To ensure that women have a base for participating in local public decisions, each 10-member council must have at least 4 women members.

Whether these councils prove to be effective governing institutions and whether the gender quotas ensure opportunities for political participation by women remain to be seen. But WIT has already generated important lessons.

The initiative has shown first that vital to its success is the support of the host country government. The Rwanda Ministry of Gender and Women in Development created the local Women's Committees that monitor WIT activities, set local priorities, and approve grant and loan awards.

The ministry also was a partner in developing the women's communal funds that relend micro-credit principal repayments for future economic development activities. The funds have a 95 percent repayment history, and the money that is recycled through the local community continues to foster new development.

With financing from these small loans, women gain valuable commercial experience. This experience both instills the confidence they need to take leadership roles within their community and endows them with the credibility they need to exercise this leadership.

WIT also demonstrates that



Source: OTI

WIT has helped bring together Rwandan war widows and the wives of husbands imprisoned for participating in the genocide. "Bringing us together," said one woman of the WIT-supported efforts, "was like medicine to our souls."

support for women's groups can promote the growth of these organizations at both the local and national levels. The number of nationally registered women's organizations has increased from 13 in 1995 to 36 today, and innumerable associations are taking root throughout Rwanda's countryside.

WIT has shown that helping women improve their economic standing in their communities also strengthens their political legitimacy. A significant percentage of the women elected to local government offices are leaders of WIT-supported associations.

CDIE Developing "Flexible Framework"

The Rwandan initiative is focusing attention on the development dividends that can be earned by empowering women to contribute to political and economic revitalization. Similar outcomes have been achieved in Guatemala, Mozambique, and other countries.

Guatemala's civil war was particularly brutal to rural, indigenous women. Refugees

fleeing to Mexico were well organized. In refugee camps, women gained the organizational experience that helped them confront and contain military repression during the repatriation process. Guatemala is said to be undergoing a "renaissance of civil society," and women's groups are at the center of this awakening.

In Mozambique, following a 16-year civil war, associations of women formed to provide skills training and basic education and to promote community land ownership. Only recently has Mozambique begun to experiment with democratic government, as its new Constitution, enacted in 1990, signaled the end of one-party rule. But women's groups have already achieved notable successes, for example, by ensuring that the 1997 Land Law specifically secures women's land tenure rights.

Last year, CDIE launched a two-year research effort to examine the potential for enlisting women's groups as primary agents for development in post-war societies. CDIE's participation in the WIT

evaluation was part of this effort. CDIE also is studying post-war developments in Guatemala, Mozambique, and elsewhere.

The CDIE case studies assess the contributions women's groups have made to the political and economic reconstruction of these societies and explore development strategies that can help enhance the political and economic position of women and women's groups.

CDIE's report is due next spring. Much of the research is complete. Its work, combined with the field experience gained in OTI's WIT initiative, will help USAID devise a framework for integrating women and women's associations into the rebuilding of post-conflict societies.

Conclusion

Societies emerging from prolonged civil conflict have the opportunity to embrace social reforms that improve women's status and allow their full participation in post-war reconstruction. Whether these reforms are forthcoming will be determined largely by whether a country follows those who urge a return to pre-war traditionalism or those who advocate embracing the new roles women have forged as they coped with the difficulties and dangers of war.

The path these countries follow will have significant repercussions for future development, so the outcome is not unimportant to USAID and other donor agencies. Those countries that enlist the active support of women and women's groups in social reconstruction may fare better in their

long-term development than those which attempt to restore the confining traditions of pre-war years. By designing transitional initiatives and longer term development strategies that acknowledge the expanded roles women take on during conflict and that extend these roles into peacetime routines, USAID can help stabilize these societies and accelerate their growth and development.

The Office of Women in Development is providing technical support to CDIE for the center's study of women and post-conflict societies, including the joint OTI/CDIE evaluation of the Rwandan Women in Transition Initiative.