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Community-Level Peace Building: Lessons From the South African Peace Committees

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not of USAID.

The Genesis of the Peace Committees¹

As part of a multi-year transition to majority rule in South Africa, 27 South African organizations committed themselves to reducing politically motivated violence by signing the National Peace Accord (NA) in a highly publicized ceremony on September 14, 1991. Violence had plagued South Africa since the 1980s as its apartheid regime—which legalized political and economic domination by white South Africans—began to crumble. From 1985 through 1990, an estimated 9,000 deaths were attributed to politically motivated violence. By early 1991, the violence was threatening the peaceful transition of the country’s political structures that had gotten under way a year earlier when State President Frederik de Klerk, leader of the ruling National Party, announced anti-apartheid organizations would no longer be banned and political prisoners would be released. De Klerk and Nelson Mandela, the highly respected opposition leader who had been detained by the government for 27 years, agreed to participate in a multiparty process aimed at creating a more peaceful environment in which to conduct the broader negotiations for a new constitutional arrangement. These discussions eventually led to the signing of the NA.²

The NA's main objective was "to bring an end to political violence in our country and to set out the codes of conduct, procedures and mechanisms to achieve this goal." Codes of conduct for the political parties and the police force were developed that defined how these groups were to operate during the transition to multiparty rule and provided means of monitoring their behavior. In order to help consolidate the peace process, guidelines were established for local socioeconomic reconstruction and development efforts.

The accord also established two mechanisms to "deal with the investigation of incidents and the causes of violence and intimidation and ... actively combat the occurrence of violence and intimidation." The first was the Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation, which became known as the

National Peace Accord

“We, participants in the political process in South Africa, representing the political parties and organizations and governments indicated beneath our signatures, condemn the scourge of political violence which has afflicted our country and all such practices as have contributed to such violence in the past, and commit ourselves and the parties, organizations and governments we represent to this National Peace Accord.

“The current prevalence of political violence in the country has already caused untold hardship, disruption and loss of life and property in our country. It now jeopardizes the very process of peaceful political transformation and threatens to leave a legacy of insurmountable division and deep bitterness in our country. Many, probably millions, of citizens live in continuous fear as a result of the climate of violence. This dehumanizing factor must be eliminated from our society....

“In order to effectively eradicate intimidation and violence, mechanisms need to be created which shall on the one hand deal with the investigation of incidents and the causes of violence and intimidation and on the other hand actively combat the occurrence of violence and intimidation.”

Source: National Peace Accord, September 14, 1991, preamble.

Goldstone Commission, after its chairman, Judge Richard Goldstone. The second was a network of regional and local dispute resolution committees, which subsequently became known as "peace committees." The work of the regional and local committees was to be overseen by a National Peace Committee and its secretariat. The peace committee network was established because the institutions of state were unable, for a variety of reasons, to find nonviolent solutions to inter-group conflicts. Indeed, in some cases, state institutions created or contributed to violence.

The Structure and Mandate of the Peace Committees

The NA created the *National Peace Committee* in order to help "implement the Accord and establish the institutions of peace." Each signatory organization had one or two seats on the National Peace Committee, with senior politicians predominating. The 60-person committee was chaired by John Hall. Hall, a businessman who had been in contact with the ANC since the early 1980s, had co-chaired the NA preparatory committee with Bishop Desmond Tutu in mid-1991. The NPC vice-chairman was Bishop Stanley Magoba, president of the Methodist Church and a former inmate of Robben Island, whose infamous prison had housed scores of political prisoners. The National Peace Committee played a marginal role in the subsequent transition, meeting only twice before the April 1994 election. Hall has characterized the National Peace Committee as a "watchdog," or monitoring, body.

The National Peace Committee

Mandate: "to monitor and to make recommendations on the implementation of the National Peace Accord as a whole and to ensure compliance with the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Organizations" [paragraph 8.2, National Peace Accord].

Membership: Representation from each signatory of the National Peace Accord.

The National Peace Committee nominated the members of the *National Peace Secretariat* (NPS) whose main task was to establish and coordinate the peace committees at the regional and local levels.³ Its members were primarily senior politicians. Created on November 8, 1991, the NPS accorded high priority to the areas most affected by the violence, the Witswatersrand-Vaal River (Witsvaal) region around Johannesburg and the KwaZulu-Natal region.

The Secretariat established the boundaries of the 11 regions the regional committees were to serve, and worked with regional leaders to establish those committees.⁴ In contrast to the National Peace Committee, the Secretariat met relatively often. It also met from time to time with the chairpersons of the regional peace committees to review their progress and engage in planning for each region.

The National Peace Secretariat

Mandate: “to establish and co-ordinate Regional Dispute Resolution Committees and thereby Local Dispute Resolution Committees” [paragraph 7.3.2, National Peace Accord].

Membership (as of November 4, 1992) :
Antonie Gildenhuys (Chairperson); Chris Fisser (National Party); Peter Gastrow (Democratic Party); Senzo Mfayela (Inkatha Freedom Party); Jayendra Naidoo (ANC Alliance); Deon Rudman (Ministry of Justice); Tokyo Sexwale (ANC Alliance); Johan Steenkamp (National Party); Suzanne Vos (Inkatha Freedom Party)

While the process of setting up *regional peace committees* was frequently contentious as the various participants in the process jockeyed for position or had to be convinced to take the peace accord seriously, by April 30, 1993, 10 RPCs were established, and the 11th and last was in the process of being set up in the Northern Cape. The National Peace Accord stated that regional and local committees would “gain their legitimacy by representing the people and the communities they are designed to serve” (paragraph 7.4.2.) In consequence, RPC members were recruited from a wide variety of civil society organizations, local and tribal authorities, and the security forces. The day-to-day administration of

the RPCs was overseen by an elected executive council and carried out by a professional staff. Regional peace committees had a varied mandate, but an especially important task was to establish local peace committees and oversee their functioning.

There was no limit on the number of *local peace committees* that could be established, and by the time the national election was held in April 1994, there were just over 260 LPCs in existence. The staff of local peace committees were appointed by the regional peace committees on a consensus basis. Their brief was to establish the LPCs and implement the National Peace Accord. The success of local peace committees was therefore highly dependent on the quality and personal characteristics of the staff. While the capacity and dedication of both LPC and RPC staff was generally quite high, biased or inexperienced staff could, and in some cases reportedly did, jeopardize the effectiveness of the entire enterprise.

Efforts to establish LPCs often ran up against a “Catch-22” situation. Where tensions existed but violence was latent, communities often questioned the need for peace committees. Once violence flared, however, community leaders were often more willing to have committees established, but the polarization resulting from the violence greatly increased the difficulty in establishing committees. In addition, the creation of local peace committees was often disrupted by individuals and organizations who believed that the existence of mechanisms to resolve disputes would run counter to their personal or institutional interests. While such problems existed throughout South Africa, the most serious problems in this regard occurred in the regions of KwaZulu-Natal and Witsvaal.⁵

Peace Committee Resources

Under the terms of the National Peace Accord, the financial resources of the peace committees were to be provided and administered by the Department of Justice.⁶ This responsibility was transferred to the Home Ministry in 1994. Although the government provided the bulk of the financial resources for the peace committees, there were two other sources of funding: private enterprise in South Africa and foreign governments through their aid agencies. Money was channeled through the National Peace Secretariat. The government never specified the amount it planned to allocate to the peace committees. Rather, it stated its intention to provide all necessary resources.

According to the South African Auditor General, expenditures by the National Peace Secretariat amounted to 65,159,313 Rand (around \$20 million) during fiscal years 1993 through 1996. Since the peace committee network began to be established in fiscal year 1992 and the expenditures registered for fiscal year 1993 are extremely modest (less than 48,000 Rand), it is clear that the 65 million Rand figure is an understatement. The Consultative Business Movement seconded staff to the peace committees in 1992 and may have assumed other expenditures as well.⁷

Five “donation funds” were established from FY 1994 through FY 1996. These were the National Peace Secretariat Training Fund, the Party Political Secondees Fund, the National Peace Secretariat Marketing Fund, the Capital Fund, and the Overseas Development Agency Fund. The latter two were financed by the British government and provided resources to acquire communications equipment and train peace monitors, respectively. The Danish government contributed to the Secondees Fund and, perhaps, to the Training Fund. The five funds appear to have accounted for some 10 million rand (just over \$3 million) additional expenditures. Foreign donors provided the bulk of this additional financing.

Regional Peace Committees

Mandate:

- C advise the National Peace Committee on causes of violence and intimidation in the region
- C settle disputes leading to violence and intimidation by negotiating with the parties to the dispute and recording agreements reached
- C monitor all peace accords applicable in the region and settle disputes that arise from their implementation
- C consult with regional authorities to limit or prevent violence and intimidation
- C oversee the work of the local peace committees
- C inform the NPS of efforts to prevent violence and intimidation within the

The Peace Committees in Action

There is widespread agreement among former staff members and observers of the South African peace committees that the structural causes of violence and the struggle for power among the major political parties limited the capacity of the committees to significantly reduce violence in South Africa prior to the 1994 elections. Yet even the NA's most severe critics do not believe that the peace committees were a complete failure. Conversations with South Africans who were involved in the peace committees at all levels suggested six crucial, interrelated functions that the committees fulfilled, to one degree or another, and against which their success can be measured.⁸

- 1) Open channels of communication.
- 2) Legitimize the concept of negotiations.
- 3) Create a safe space to raise issues that could not be addressed in other fora.
- 4) Strengthen accountability.
- 5) Help equalize the power balance.
- 6) Help reduce the incidence of violence.

These functions are clearly much broader than the specific tasks the regional and local peace committees were mandated to carry out. Virtually every element of the committees' official mandates (listed in the relevant boxes on the preceding pages) can be classified as contributing to at least three or four of these functions. In general, the peace committees succeeded in carrying out both their NA-mandated tasks and the broader functions identified by former peace workers. However, the ability of any given committee at either the regional or local level to carry out any specific task varied substantially based on the environment in which the particular committee was operating.

Local Peace Committees

Mandate:

- C create "trust and reconciliation" at the grass roots, including among the members of the security forces
- C eliminate conditions detrimental to peaceful relations generally and the NA in specific
- C settle disputes leading to violence and intimidation by negotiating with the parties and recording agreements reached
- C promote compliance with the peace accords
- C reach agreement on rules and conditions for marches, rallies, and other public events
- C liaise with the local police and magistrates regarding the prevention of violence and cooperate with local Justices of the peace
- C address issues referred from the NPC and the RPC
- C report to the RPC, including making recommendations as appropriate.

Membership: LPCs "will be constituted by drawing representatives reflecting the needs of the relevant community" [paragraph 7.4.7, National Peace Accord].

The environment in which the peace committees had to function was extremely complex. There were factors that facilitated their work and factors that complicated it—sometimes to the point of impossibility. The interaction of these positive and negative factors determined what the peace committees were able to achieve. Not surprising, there were wide variations in the way each factor influenced the work of individual peace committees, and there were significant regional differences as well. Peace committees areas where secret, state-sanctioned paramilitary hit squads known as the “third force” operated with impunity—notably KwaZulu-Natal and the townships around Johannesburg in the Witwatersrand-Vaal River region—experienced considerably more difficulty in achieving their objectives than committees in areas such as the Western Cape where “third force” activity was less pervasive and the police and armed forces generally participated constructively in the work of the peace committees.

Enhancing Police Accountability

“Initially it was difficult for us to monitor the activities of the police around-the-clock, but once a business enterprise donated three armored vehicles, we were able to monitor police activity during the night time as well as during the day. The police understood that they had to be accountable at all times, and the level of violence declined during the night hours.”

Source: Author’s interview with former LPC staff member, May 1997.

Police and the Peace Committees in the Western Cape

“It was critical to the success of the process in the Western Cape that the South African Police accepted the authority of the peace structures. Although there sometimes was a discrepancy between what was said by police at peace committee meetings and the behavior of the SAP on the ground, they basically complied with the NA. High-ranking police and army officials participated in the peace structures, which was very important.”

Source: Author’s interview with former peace committee staff member, April 1997.

Viewed as a whole, the peace committees had a mixed record, and it is impossible to make a definitive assessment of their success or failure. The peace committees were unable to stop violence completely but often limited its occurrence. Virtually every former peace committee member or staffer interviewed by the author in 1997 maintained that the committees “saved lives,” particularly through their monitoring of public events. The peace committees were unable to end impunity on the part of the security forces, but they were able to help equalize the balance of power between those in power and ordinary citizens on specific issues and to strengthen the concept of accountability. A very high value was placed on the capacity of peace committees to promote communication between individuals and groups where none had existed or seemed possible before. The capacity of the committees to address the underlying causes of conflict was circumscribed, but even in the most violence-ridden areas peace committee staff were able to mediate conflicts and create a safe space within which problems could be discussed. And while the peace committees were unable to transform the “struggle” mentality, they were able to help South Africans take their first steps toward understanding the value of negotiations and how to engage in them constructively.

Learning from South Africa

The growing number of complex political emergencies and major political transitions around the world has led to considerable interest in mechanisms to minimize violent conflict. Because the peace committees that operated in South Africa from 1991 through 1994 to assist the transition to majority rule had a limited but nonetheless important positive impact on the peace process, the question has arisen if this mechanism might not be replicable in other transition countries. An examination of the South African peace committee experiment demonstrates that it does offer a number of lessons for conflict management elsewhere in the world, in terms of what to emulate, what to avoid, and the limits of peace committees as a conflict management tool. It also provides an indication of the environment in which peace committees will be most successful.

Lesson 1: Peace committees can be valuable conflict management tools.

The South African experience demonstrates that peace committees, at the local, regional, and national levels, can help manage conflict in deeply divided societies. The South African peace committees illustrate that *under the appropriate conditions* efforts to engender dialog and bring opposing parties together to solve mutual problems can contribute to reducing violence, breaking negative patterns of inter-group and interpersonal interactions, and fostering the constructive relationships that are the basic building blocks of peaceful societies.

In South Africa, peace committees were employed primarily as a short-term tool to help manage conflict during an interim period while the country's political transition was being negotiated. In other countries, it may be useful to explore the possibility of using peace committees in a preventive mode, prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and to support political transitions over the medium-term. The South African government elected in April 1994 ceased funding the peace committees because it felt that the institutions of state would be able to represent the interests of all citizens once multiparty rule was in place. In fact, the legacies of apartheid cannot be overcome that rapidly, and it is clear that there is a continuing need for trust building and relationship strengthening, particularly at the local level. This same need exists in other countries engaged in significant political transitions. Until adequate mechanisms of governance are in place, and the history of state dominance repression can be overcome, innovative methods of building trust among the different groups within society will be required.

Seeing with New Eyes

“The peace committees were extremely important at the personal level. People from different groups met for the first time *as equals*. This enabled them to see each other in a different light and to build relationships based on mutual respect and trust.”

Source: Author's interview with former peace committee member, May 1997.

Lesson 2: Concept should not be confused with structure.

The peace committee *concept* is transferable, but the precise form such committees

assume should be developed locally. Many former peace committee members and staff interviewed in 1997 stressed that the South African peace committees were highly context-specific and cautioned against blindly transferring the South African peace committee *structure* to other countries with different social, political, and economic conditions.

Indeed, the South African experience demonstrates that cultural and historical variations may require different approaches even within the same country. Many of those interviewed argued that different structures were required in different parts of the country to take into account different patterns of authority. Others noted that the way in which peace committees dealt with the same problems varied according to local needs. The objective, they stressed, should be to ensure consistency of goals and principles, rather than the duplication of specific structures.

The Need for Regional Variation

“There should have been sufficient flexibility within the NA to allow a completely different approach to creating peace structures in KwaZulu-Natal. The NA was drawn up by urban slickers, and while it recognized the traditional leadership, the structures it prescribed were designed with urban needs in mind. This shows that a rigid, prescriptive approach to designing peace structures within the ‘same’ society is not desirable.”

Source: Author’s interview with former peace committee member, May 1997.

Lesson 3: While peace committees can be a valuable conflict management tool, they are not appropriate in every setting. It is important to evaluate the environment into which peace committees are to be introduced to determine if a sufficient number of key enabling factors are in place.

The South African experience with peace committees illustrates that certain environmental factors increase the likelihood that the committees will be able to make a positive contribution to a political transition. These elements do not always have to be present to justify the creation of peace committees. However, the absence of a significant number of them will call into question the viability of peace committees.

It is difficult to say how many of these factors need to be present to justify an investment in peace committees. An evaluation of the South African experience suggests that the first two factors discussed below—political will and the attitude of the security forces and other armed groups—are especially critical. No matter how talented the staff, how inclusive the committees, or how rooted in local communities, efforts by peace committees to find community-based solutions to problems generating violence will not succeed if the major players do not accept the need for a fundamental transition and if armed groups can operate with impunity. Some South Africans have gone so far as to suggest that no attempt should be made to develop peace committees in the absence of a formal mandate at the national level. This is probably true for the establishment of a national network of peace committees. However, if there is sufficient capacity and will at the local

level, it may make sense to invest resources in supporting individual groups, with the understanding that such groups are constantly in danger of being thwarted from above.

The 14 most important environmental factors influencing the relative degree of success experienced by South African peace committees are as follows.

Political will. The work of peace committees at the local and regional levels will be greatly facilitated if there is sufficient political will on the part of the parties to the conflict to commit to a major political transition and if these actors have sufficient capacity to compel their members at all levels to ensure that their actions are consistent with the goals of that transition. A major stumbling block that confronted the South African peace committees and is likely to be replicated in other transition countries is that the desire to maximize political advantage during electoral periods can reduce the willingness of political parties to cooperate with peace committees and seriously undermine their effectiveness.

Attitude of the security forces and other armed groups. An end to impunity on the part of the security forces and all other armed groups, formal and informal, state and nonstate, is critical to the effective functioning of peace committees. In South Africa, the ability of “third force” death squads to continue their activities through the entire transition period essentially unhindered severely jeopardized the ability of the peace committees to carry out their mandated tasks.

Responsible, dynamic leadership. The work of peace committees will be greatly facilitated by the support of individuals in positions of leadership who are highly respected in their own communities and who are able through the force of their personality and convictions to keep the political transition moving forward.

Civil society. Without a civil society that is sufficiently well-developed to make a constructive contribution to the political transition, it is unlikely that peace committees will take root.

Accountability. For peace committees to function effectively, official actors must be held accountable for their actions. This process can be facilitated if peace committees are mandated to monitor the activities of key actors such as political parties, the security forces, local government structures, and the media.

Political Considerations Take Precedence Over Commitment to the Peace Process

The Inkatha Freedom Party joined a local peace committee in KwaZulu-Natal in March 1992. Three months later, the local IFP leadership formally suspended participation. The local peace committee staff were told that the national IFP leadership had objected to the decision to withdraw, but nevertheless failed to compel the local IFP leader to resume participation in the LPC. LPC staff assumed that this decision was based on the calculation that participation in the peace committee would harm the IFP politically in this particular area.

Source: Author's interview with former peace committee staff member, April 1997

Developing relationships of trust. Where key stakeholders have had the opportunity to develop relationships of trust with each other over an extended period of time, the work of peace committees is facilitated. Relationships can be built under fire, but it is more difficult.

Local ownership of peace committees. The greater the sense of ownership of the peace committees within the communities they are meant to serve, the more effective they will be. The ability to draw on community members to supplement the efforts of the salaried staff will help build ownership of the work of the peace committees.

Inclusivity. Peace committees benefit from the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the work of the peace committees, particularly groups that are often marginalized such as women, youth, the displaced.

Even-handed approach. Peace committees will be successful to the extent that they are able to be even-handed in all of their undertakings and to inculcate the value of even-handedness among all participants in the political transition. Even-handedness may be misinterpreted as support for the “other” side, but is critical to the process of bringing opposing groups together and building relationships of trust.

Communicating peace. Peace committees need to break the monopoly warring parties have over information. They need to be proactive about informing the largest possible number of citizens about the nature of the committees and how these committees can benefit them. Radio, video, and theater presentations are components of effective communications strategies in countries where there are high rates of illiteracy and television the print media do not reach beyond urban areas. Innovative methods of combating rumor are extremely important.

Rooting Peace Committees in the Community

“The ANC and the National Party made a deal. The peace committee structures were an important mechanism that enabled them to say: ‘These are the parameters within which we can govern the country and monitor the security forces as we move toward elections.’ At the community level, however, this was not evident. Rather, all community members saw was people coming in to facilitate conflict management. There was no input from the communities when the committees were set up. There was a sense of urgency to get the peace process under way; but there could have been a more sensitive approach.”

Source: Author’s interview with former peace committee staff member, May 1997.

Financing. It is important to develop methods of delivering financial support to peace committees in a timely and effective manner, based on the principle of local control over resources with a high standard of accountability.

Organizational flexibility. Successful peace committees are able to respond according to needs on the ground and have an organizational ethos that values contingency planning. One of the most important innovations among the South African peace committees—which saved an unknown but not insignificant number of lives—was the decision to extend their mandate and engage in proactive monitoring of public events. The objective was to prevent demonstrations, public meetings, funerals, and other formal and impromptu events from degenerating into violence and often required peace committee staff and unpaid peace monitors physically positioning themselves between armed disputing parties.

Staffing. The ability to identify staff with the appropriate mix of skills and personality to operate effectively in an uncertain, high-tension, constantly changing environment will enhance the success of peace committees.

International support. An international observer force with a pro-active mandate can enhance the legitimacy of peace committees and provide critical technical support. Donors can fill critical gaps in the resources available to peace committees by providing financial, material, and technical support but should consult closely with the committees to ensure that the appropriate resources are being provided.

Lesson 4: Build on what exists locally and take local ownership seriously.

Although the local peace committees in South Africa could have been better rooted in the communities they served, the decision to create a peace committee network and its implementation was entirely driven by South Africans. Furthermore, large numbers of highly committed South African citizens participated in the work of the peace committees in the belief that their involvement could lead to a more peaceful political transition. Had the concept of peace committees not developed organically from within South African society, it is highly likely that the South African peace committees would have been a good deal less effective than they proved to be.

Lack of an Adequate Budgeting Process

“If there were budgets for the peace committees, these were not communicated to either RPC or LPC staff. We had tremendous difficulty in accessing resources. The national secretariat should have indicated how much would be spent in priority areas and then within that, how much could be spent at the local level. Then indicative budgeting could have been done. Staff could have been authorized to spend against this budget. However, the NPS staff lacked proper project managers.”

“You could not just go out and rent an office and then get the approval of the Department of Justice. There were many bureaucratic hoops to jump through.”

Source: Author’s interview with former peace committee staff members, May 1997.

When contemplating the applicability of peace committees to other societies, it is important to recognize that the peace committee concept almost certainly will not be viable in the absence of significant pre-existing local commitment. Efforts to develop civil society institutions in South Africa and other countries have demonstrated that nongovernmental organizations and "committees" arise like mushrooms when funding is available, but that these structures are frequently not rooted in society and have little capacity to work at the community level.

It is not easy for outside actors such as development assistance agencies to identify appropriate local partners. It requires time and the commitment to devote resources to getting to know the relevant actors, identifying those that should be supported, and determining how external resources can most usefully support their efforts. It is a process that will be most effective when it is field-driven, so that the context within which support is provided is understood. Headquarters can determine the broad parameters within which assistance will be provided, but the determination of who receives resources for what purpose should be made on the ground following a lengthy, detailed examination of the options.

The assistance provided should also respond to needs on the ground as expressed by the individuals and organizations receiving the assistance. Every effort should be made to enter into a genuine dialog with local stakeholders about their needs and to base funding decisions on the results of these consultations. A great deal of resentment is created when local ownership is given lip service but actual funding decisions are based primarily on donors' agendas. The level of resentment in South Africa is particularly high in view of the strength of civil society organizations there.

Lesson 5. Be prepared to make a long-term commitment to conflict management.

There are no quick-fix solutions to violent conflicts. Breaking the cycle of violence requires building a complex web of constructive intergroup and interpersonal relationships. These relationships will only be built as trust develops among the different stakeholders, and creating trust is a long-term proposition. Enduring change probably cannot be achieved in less than a generation. It is likely that a peace committee structure designed to meet the needs of an interim transition period such as the one in South Africa in 1991–1994 will need to be transformed—probably several times—as the political system becomes progressively more mature. However, the South African experience points to the need for some type of continuing forum to promote intergroup and interpersonal dialog and problem solving at all levels of society.

This time frame poses a problem for external actors, which have tended to provide intensive support to political transitions for a period of two to three years and consider five years to be "long-term." The international community as a whole and the development assistance community in particular are slowly coming to the realization that post-conflict environments require lengthy commitments. It is uncertain, however, whether they will be able to act on this realization in any meaningful way, such as moving to a 10-year rolling planning cycle for post-conflict countries.

At a minimum, donors need to explore how to make their support for specific conflict management mechanisms such as peace committees more sustainable. One way to increase sustainability would be to provide peace committee staff members with skills that will enhance their effectiveness. Intensive political transitions may not be the optimal environment for providing training in areas such as mediation, administration, and financial management, but the South African experience shows that there is a demand for such assistance. Indeed, many younger peace committee staff members were reportedly frustrated and angry by the failure of more senior staff to arrange such training for them. Another avenue would be to monitor the activities of peace committees at the local level during the interim transition period with a view to determining whether any of them should continue to exist in the next stage of the transition and what sort of support they might need to continue their work.

Conclusion

The South African experience has demonstrated that peace committees have the potential to make a significant contribution to conflict management. To do so, it is important not to attempt to duplicate specific structures, but to agree on the goals and principles that the peace committees should further and how these committees will interact with the institutions of state.

The South African experience has also shown that the potential contribution of peace committees will only be realized if an enabling environment exists. Extensive interviews with South Africans involved in the work of the peace committees have identified the central features of that enabling environment. The most critical of these are the political will to engage in a fundamental political transformation and the capacity to translate that will into action as well as the ability to prevent the security forces and other armed groups from acting with impunity.

The South African experience also strongly suggests that the peace committee concept will probably not be viable in a society that lacks significant, pre-existing local commitment among civil society organizations to working constructively to support the political transition. While external actors, including donor organizations, can play an important role in fostering local initiatives, it is important that these initiatives develop organically and not merely in response to the offer of external financial assistance.

Endnotes

1. This paper is based on a report to USAID prepared by Nicole Ball with the assistance of Chris Spies, *Managing Conflict: Lessons from the South African Experience*, October 1997.
2. Key NA signatories included the government, the security forces, the major political parties represented in Parliament (such as the National Party, the Democratic Party, and the Labor Party), the ANC, the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Communist Party of South Africa, and the

Congress of South African trade Unions (COSATU). The Pan Africanist Congress and the Azanian People's Organization did not sign the accord because of strong non-collaborationist views, but attended the conference and indicated their support for the spirit and objectives of the accord. Three right-wing parties (the Conservative Party, the Afrikaner Volksfront, and the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging) refused to participate in any aspect of the process, which they viewed as a form of capitulation to the ANC.

3. Details of the powers, functions, and duties of the NPS are found in "Internal Peace Institutions Act, No. 135 of 1992, 4 November 1992, as amended by Judicial Matters Amendment Act, No. 143 of 1992 and Internal Peace Institutions Amendment Act, No. 149 of 1993, " paragraph 4, as well as the National Peace Accord.

4. These eleven regions covered the entire territory of South Africa with the exception of three "independent" states created during the apartheid era that had chosen not to sign the NA—Bophuthatswana, and Transkei, and Venda—and Ciskei, which had signed the accord but subsequently withdrew from active participation in its implementation.

5. Mark Shaw, *Crying Peace Where There is None?*, Research Report No. 31, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, August 1993, p. 7.

6. *National Peace Accord*, paragraph 7.3.4.

7. CBM was a voluntary association of senior business leaders that supported a constructive transformation of the South African political system in order to create a stable foundation for economic growth and development.

8. South African conflict management experts divide peace-related activities into three categories: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peace building. In order not to overburden the reader with multiple classifications, this report will limit itself to the assessment of the peace committees based on their original mandate compared with these six functions. Readers interested in this classification should consult, *inter alia*, Andries Odendaal and Chris Spies, *Local Peace Committees in the Rural Areas of the Western Cape: Their Significance for South Africa's Transition to Democracy*, Occasional Paper/Track Two, Cape Town: Centre for Conflict Resolution, September 1996, PP. 6-9.