



# FOSTERING RECONCILIATION THROUGH TREE PLANTING

An approach that uses tree planting as a symbol and expression of hope for genuine reconciliation and sustainable peace within the community



**Shalom Educating for Peace**  
Building and sustaining positive peace through education



# FOREWORD

This booklet is an illustration of the creativity of the human spirit. Communities in Rwanda addressed the issue of fostering reconciliation from an innovative and homegrown approach – that of tree planting. Specifically, tree planting can take on the function of catalysing and enabling social interaction which can lay the foundation for deep transformation through dialogue between former victim and perpetrators.

The tree planting has symbolic and practical significance. At its core the act of planting is symbolic of laying new foundations for a transformed relationship, which needs to be nurtured. The act of nurturing the tree symbolises the persistent effort that is required to transform societies. Ultimately, the growth of the tree is representative of the fostering of reconciliation, a process that can transcend several generations of human society. The planting of a tree also creates a space where community members can physically meet, have dialogue on issues that hinder their reconciliation, and discuss possible and practical solutions that are adapted to their specific situation.

The importance of this booklet is evident in the innovative and creative way in which it brings together people who have a deep mistrust and suspicion for each other, to explore the possibilities of living together.

Three stages characterise the process of planting a tree:

- The first is related to the planting of a single tree and the activities of nurturing it together as community comprising former victims and former perpetrators who are now considered agents of peace and reconciliation;
- The second stage consists of planting five additional trees around the first one. This process is aimed at consolidating the space where community dialogue takes place;
- The important last step brings the process to the individual level, where a former victim and a former perpetrator agree to plant a tree on each other's compounds or fields. The process does not end with the planting of the tree but also includes the process of nurturing it. The ultimate idea is to create a space of contact between former enemies and to transform their relations from enmity to collaboration and potentially to harmonious coexistence.

The hope is that this booklet will inspire additional innovative and culture-specific efforts to symbolically represent reconciliation processes. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) is pleased to have partnered with the Shalom Educating for Peace (SEP), based in Rwanda, on this important initiative.

**Dr Tim Murithi**

Head, IJR Justice and Reconciliation Programme

1 February 2015



# INTRODUCTION

Shalom Educating for Peace (SEP) aims to build peace through education and community projects. SEP facilitates and accompanies communities in taking steps toward reconciliation and sustainable peace. SEP works in solidarity with communities to lay a foundation for hope and positive development. One of SEP's initiatives involves planting trees with community members as symbols of peace and reconciliation. These trees can bear fruit and are not genetically modified, so they will benefit the community for a long time. Tree planting is used as a way of educating citizens and providing a symbolic gesture that continues the process of sustainable unity and peace.

The goal of the programme is for community members in villages across Rwanda to commit themselves to continuing the journey of reconciliation through tree planting. It may be done in three different phases over the course of four years. The days the trees are planted can be significant days, such as World Peace Day, or to celebrate the steps made by each village on the journey toward reconciliation and peace. The trees will become symbols of hope, reconciliation and progress to the community and everyone will do their part to care for the tree, bringing communities closer together.

## WHY TREES?



Trees are used for this project, because the planting of trees symbolises the process of building unity, reconciliation and peace. Trees are used in this project for the following reasons:

- A tree provides shade under which people can rest and be protected from harsh sunshine.
- A tree can serve as a metaphor for the circle of life, since it grows from a young seed into a large tree, gets old, and eventually returns to the earth.
- When we plant a tree, we prove that there is hope to live together in peace.
- Every year a tree grows new leaves. In the same way, people renew their mindsets and overcome past wounds caused by history.
- A tree produces fruit for today's and tomorrow's generations.
- Trees provide goods that benefit the economy in different ways.
- A tree can help us remember the commitment the community made to reconciliation. When people go to see the tree that was planted, they will also think about their journey to reconciliation.
- A tree is a symbol of unity, since the leaves, branches and fruit are all linked to the trunk, which can represent the unity of the people of Rwanda.
- When old leaves fall from the branches they still benefit the tree because they become fertiliser that helps the tree to grow, just as wisdom learnt from the past helps future generations.

“ He who plants a tree, plants a hope.  
– Lucy Larcom

# PHASE I – CREATING SPACE

When people from the community understand and accept that reconciliation and peace are priorities in their village, and that development should be built on the foundation of peace, they plant a tree in a place reserved for community dialogues or meetings. This is the place where the community members will be meeting and sharing stories about their journey to reconciliation, discussing conflicts that can take place in households, initiating a forum for educating youth about the culture of integrity and honesty (*ubupfura*) and other values in Rwandan culture. This creates a space to talk about and address issues such as people who do not uphold ethical values in the community. In other words, this place would be both a physical and metaphorical space for dialogue towards reconciliation and peace.

Every time community members come to this meeting place they can conclude their dialogues by looking at the tree and remembering the motive for planting it, caring for it, and treating it with respect. By caring for this tree, they prove that they are committed to choosing a culture of peace in their community that they can pass on to the next generation. Community members are encouraged to plant grass around the tree so people can have a comfortable place to sit during dialogues and meetings. The space surrounding the tree is a reminder that, if communities are committed to moving toward reconciliation, safe spaces are needed where the community can meet.





# PHASE II – FIVE TREES FOR PEACE

The second phase of the programme involves planting five more trees, surrounding the place where the community dialogues takes place. These trees surrounding the meeting place provide more shade for people and make it a more comforting space. These trees should be fruit trees, so community members and children can harvest fruit from them. The five trees have a strong meaning for Shalom Educating for Peace and its partners. The word 'shalom' symbolises that a society is striving for holistic, sustainable peace.

Five points that are analysed to see if positive peace has been reached are:

- 1) to see if those who have been in conflicts are reconciled;
- 2) to see that every sort of injustice is overcome and that there is no longer injustice;
- 3) to see that communities are free from fear of one another;
- 4) to see the wounded hearts and memories of communities healed; and
- 5) to see society developing in a holistic way, characterised by prosperity.



The five trees symbolise the five pillars of complete peace for the community. Each tree is planted by different community members. The five trees are planted by the following people: a community elected leader; a child representing the younger generation; a perpetrator of the genocide; a victim's family member or survivor of the genocide; and a mediator/peacebuilder. One of the trees can also be planted by a person representing partners and friends or family members who are assisting, supporting and encouraging the process of reconciliation and peace. Some people participate as witnesses to the commitment of the community members to the reconciliation process. This particular activity takes place during the second year of the programme.





# PHASE III

## TREES OF RECONCILIATION

The third phase focuses on individuals who are in conflict with one another and hope to reach reconciliation. Once the offender and the victim have reached a point where they would like to reconcile their past, they can plant a tree together. The offender plants a tree for reconciliation in the victim's home, and the victim plants a tree for reconciliation in the offender's home. They plant the trees publicly so that their neighbours can witness the symbolic gesture. Anyone who has planted a tree shall continue caring for it by fertilising and watering it. By taking care of one another's trees the offender and victim are able to visit each other and continue their path toward reconciliation. Children from both families (offender and victim) may harvest fruit from both of the planted trees.

This phase normally takes place in the third year of the programme. However, if the wounds are still painful and they do not agree to reconcile with one another, then a tree should not be planted. Since the tree planting is a symbolic gesture of reconciliation it would be harmful to plant the trees when the individuals do not feel ready to truly reconcile. The trees should only be planted once the two individuals agree to live peacefully together in the community.

This phase can also serve as a way to assess whether or not progress has been made during this difficult journey. It is important that the individuals involved in the process are respected and never forced to plant these trees if they do not feel ready to do so. Reconciliation is a journey of the heart and cannot be forced onto others.



# OVERVIEW OF FOSTERING RECONCILIATION THROUGH TREE PLANTING



## Phase I: Creating Space

Plant one tree, to create a space for community dialogues and meetings.

## Phase II: Five Trees for Peace

Plant five trees, which represent the different pillars of peace, including fear calmed, injustices righted, prospering communities, hurts healed, and society reconciled.

## Phase III: Trees of Reconciliation

When the offender and victim are ready for a deeper symbolic step in the reconciliation process, they will plant trees on each other's land.



## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

SEP hopes that every village in Rwanda will have a safe space for community dialogue where community members can come together and talk about their journey towards reconciliation and development. During community dialogues, people will be able to discuss ways of overcoming conflicts, challenging disharmony in the community, and understanding one another.

SEP will work in solidarity with community members to ensure they can take ownership of this process. The creation of this community space will give communities a place to discuss conflicts in their own villages. Through the tree planting programme, communities can continue the long journey toward reconciliation and peace through dialogue.

*Planting trees is one of my great pleasures. I have three thoughts to share. First, it is one thing to plant a tree but it is another to care for it, especially during its early days. Without ongoing care, many trees will not survive. This is a lesson for other parts of our lives as well. Second, the trees we plant today will take a number of years to bear fruit or provide wood. This is a valuable lesson in a world which increasingly wants 'quick fixes' and wants things now. Third, tree planting is a great way to celebrate and to help people reconcile.*

*The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is now.*

**Prof. Geoff Thomas Harris, Durban University of Technology**



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